

SELF-STUDY COURSE

Boundaries in Foster Care Part 2 Maintaining Boundaries in Your Foster Home

This self-study written by ACRF staff in May 2025.

2.5 Training Credits

ITP Topic: Boundaries & Touch

This self-study is based on the following sources:

Episode #69 Setting Boundaries: The Tough Love Your Family Really Needs

<https://modernparentingsolutions.org/episode69/> From the Modern Parenting Solutions Podcast

The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family by Karyn B. Purvis, David R. Cross, et al. | Apr 22, 2007

Boundaries: Difficult to Establish, Necessary for Relationship

March 16, 2021. By Laura Beth DeHority, LMFT <https://helponechild.org/boundaries-difficult-to-establish-necessary-for-relationship>

Seven Key Principles of Self Regulations and Self Regulation in Context Murray, D.W., Rosanbalm, K., and ChristopouFlos, C. (2016). Administration for Children and Families, US. Department of Health and Human Services.

Ashley Patek's article 9 Mantras I Use When Low On Patience With My Kids <https://genmindful.com/blogs/mindful-moments/9-mantras-i-use-when-low-on-patience-with-my-kids>

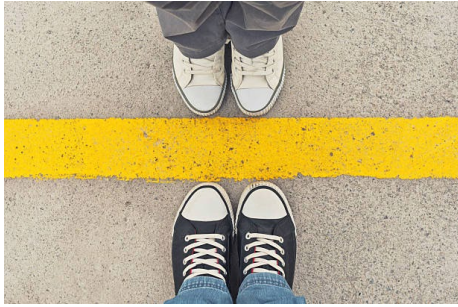
Teaching Social Skills to Youth 4th Edition, 2022. by [M.Ed. Jeff Tierney](#) (Author), [MS Erin Green](#) (Author) and Original Source **Rebuilding Children's Lives**. Boys Town Press, Boys Town, Nebraska, 1996.

This self-study course was developed by Aileen M. McInnis for the Alaska Center for Resource Families.



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Boundaries In Foster Care

Part Two: Maintaining Boundaries in Your Foster Home

NOTE: **Boundaries in Foster Care** is a two-part series. **Part One: Boundaries in Your Role as a Foster Parent** explores professional boundaries and working with the Office of Children's Services, the birth parent, and with other professionals. **Part Two: Maintaining Boundaries in Your Foster Home** focuses on what happens in the home and explore setting boundaries in the family.

What do We Mean by Maintaining Boundaries?

Imagine standing in a public place. Someone you don't know walks over and stands very close to you even though there is plenty of space. You start to feel uncomfortable. You feel it in your stomach and your neck and shoulder muscles begin to tense up. It may feel even more intense and unsafe if there is no one else around.

In this situation, most people would automatically step back to put distance between themselves and the stranger in order to get rid of that uncomfortable feeling. That's an example of maintaining a boundary. Boundaries are based on expectations of how you interact with other people and how other people should interact with you. Good boundaries are meant to keep us safe and comfortable.

Now imagine if it was your child who came up to you and stood that close. You would feel totally fine with that. You may even reach out and pull them closer. Being that close would make you feel good.

Our boundaries change based on our roles and on our trust level with the people around us. If this same child starts crawling over us or interrupts us if we are having a conversation or starts hitting us, our comfort level may change, and we may get irritated. Even though we love this child, they are not respecting our need to feel safe and comfortable.

Boundaries are a mental map of where our needs end and another person's needs begin. Boundaries allow us to have relationships with others without being hurt, misused, or damaged or without hurting the other person. Understanding boundaries is especially important in foster care because so many children come from environments where their personal boundaries have been violated or disrespected (such as in abuse or neglect). Living in a foster family can help a child heal from these experiences. But foster parents may also find themselves struggling with maintaining boundaries with children or their birth parents, or even with the child's caseworker or with a therapist.

Boundaries are lines that establish what one person will accept of another person's actions and words.

--Laura Beth DeHority, LMFT

Boundaries exist in **five** areas:

Physical boundaries include personal space, limitations concerning who can touch them, how they can be touched, where they can be touched, and when they can be touched.

Material boundaries relate to belongings. Some people may not feel comfortable loaning or sharing belongings. In such cases, it is also not appropriate to ask.

Mental boundaries are respecting that other people may not share the same thoughts, values, opinions, and beliefs as you. Any attempt to coerce them into having the same thoughts, values opinions and beliefs may result in arguments or bullying behavior.

Emotional boundaries recognize that all people have emotions and are affected by the actions of other people. Everyone is responsible for his or her own emotions and choices.

Time boundaries include the awareness of respecting others' time and clearly communicating their own time needs.



Ideally, foster parents will be able to:

- Set boundaries for themselves including being self-regulated, respectful, able to provide discipline and guidance in a positive way, and able to model good behavior.
- Help children to learn boundaries to stay safe and be safe around others.
- Set boundaries for others who interact with their foster child to provide safety and a healing experience for a child.



Boundaries in Your Foster Home

Section 1: Recognizing Your Own Boundaries As A Foster Parent

Do you find yourself:

- ☐ *Snooping in your child's drawers? Or reading personal journals or looking on a child's phone?*
- ☐ *Setting up ways to spy on children for reasons other than safety? Or cameras in bathrooms or bedrooms?*
- ☐ *Asking very personal questions of a child or a birth parent? Or involving yourself in other people's business even when it does not involve you?*
- ☐ *Making decisions for another person without asking for their input about what they want?*
- ☐ *Oversharing about your own life with children, your caseworker or with other foster parents?*
- ☐ *Saying yes then being resentful because you really wanted to say no? Or agreeing to do something, then not doing it and avoiding the person who asked you to do it?*
- ☐ *Sharing confidential information about your foster child with friends when they ask about your child?*

If these are things you do, it may be a sign that you need to look closer at your own boundaries. Your boundaries are influenced by your childhood, your personal attachment style, your view of your role as a foster parent, and by any therapy or healing work you may have done. When we as foster parents have healthy boundaries, we are more likely to keep ourselves from burning out and less likely to cross over the line into unsafe behavior or even abuse.

How can you focus on maintaining healthy boundaries for yourself?

Strive for self-regulation and consistent self-care

Start with taking care of yourself *physically, emotionally, and socially*. Foster care is hard work! If you are always giving and not taking care of your own needs, you will run out of gas. When you are worn down or under a lot of stress, it is easy to get “dysregulated.” Self-regulation refers to being able to manage your thoughts and feelings in a positive way, to control your impulses, and intentionally act in a positive way that isn't hurtful to others. When you get “dysregulated,” you may be in an emotional state where you are angry and yell, name call, threaten, reject or even become physical with another person. And that is hurtful to them. Make sure you are getting rest and food, take breaks, and stop yourself if you feel you are getting out of control.

ASK YOURSELF

Am I respecting this child's autonomy as a person?
Their boundaries? Their need for privacy or confidentiality? Am I intruding on their body? Am I seeing them as a vulnerable person who needs my care, attunement, and attention?



Practice Responsible Caregiving

This means promoting the safety and wellbeing of a child through responsible and non-hurtful discipline. Do not use any kind of physical punishment with a child. Avoid shaming or name calling or other hurtful behavior.

Treat your children with the respect you would want to receive

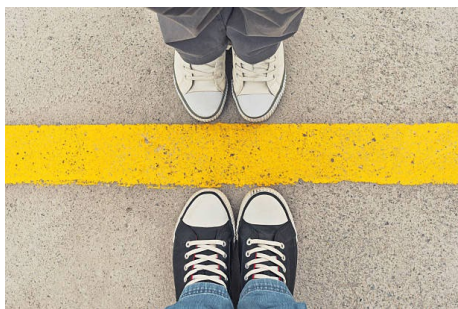
Parents have a lot of responsibility and power over children. It is good practice for parents to be respectful with their power and their actions. When appropriate, engage children in decisions about themselves, ask what they think, acknowledge their feelings and preferences. Respect their space and their privacy by not sharing their personal information or history with your friends, or not invading their private spaces with searches or video cameras unless necessary and asking permission to enter their bedrooms.

Define your values and limits to protect your internal boundaries

It helps to know your own values in doing foster care and review these often to help you with good boundaries. Having a mantra or a prayer or a phrase to yourself helps keep you focused. It helps you focus your intention back on the impact you want to have on a child. Check out the ideas below to spark your ideas for a mantra that will work for you.

Adapted from **9 Mantras I Use When Low On Patience With My Kids** by Ashley Patek

1. Pause. Breath. Start again.
2. This too shall pass.
3. Misbehavior is an unmet need.
4. All emotions are allowed.
5. My goal is to connect, not be right or control.
6. I am allowed to set boundaries and my child is allowed to feel their feelings about them.
7. My child's behavior is not my report card.
8. My triggers are mine. They are separate from my child.
9. I am enough. I am what this child needs at this moment.
10. I want to help, not hurt.



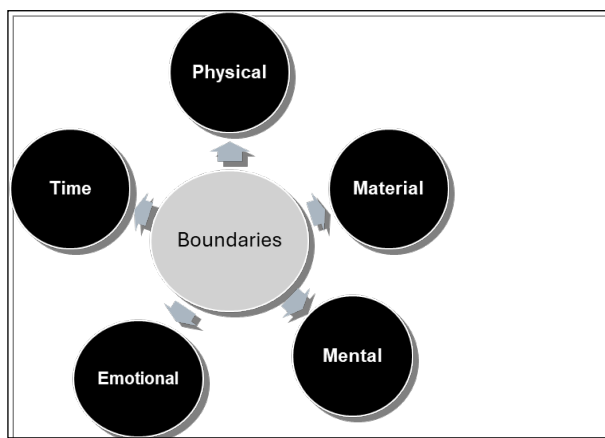
Boundaries in Your Foster Home

Section 2: Helping Children Develop Appropriate Boundaries

Boundaries are learned throughout childhood. A toddler's "No!" or "Me do it!" establishes their own identity separate from their parent and begins a sense of *me*. When children are physically abused, their sense of safety is violated. When children are neglected or psychologically mistreated, their internal sense of being cared for is weak. Many of these children have trouble feeling whole and safe within their own bodies.

As mentioned earlier in this self-study, there are different kinds of boundaries and children must learn to internalize these boundaries into their own behavior. They are not born with this ability.

Remember the five areas of boundaries?



Physical boundaries -personal space, rules around touching and being touched

Material boundaries- what belongs to me? What belongs to other people? How does sharing work?

Mental boundaries- respecting other people's thoughts, values, opinions, and beliefs even if they are not ones you share

Emotional boundaries-recognizing, accepting, and honoring other people's feelings. understanding and taking responsibility for how our actions impact others

Time boundaries- being aware of and respecting others' time, and clearly communicating your own time needs

Children who grow up in violent households struggle with these boundaries. Children with neurodevelopmental difficulties such as pre-natal alcohol exposure or autism also often have trouble with boundaries in some of these five areas. They don't always recognize the social clues that they have invaded another person's comfort zone. Or their impulsiveness does not give them time to think how their actions are going to affect others.

Signs that a child may be having boundary problems may include:

- *Does not respect other people's possessions or use their things without asking*
- *Want to always touch or hug or kiss other children or adults*
- *Constantly needs attention or praise or acknowledgement or who are constantly engaging attention through misbehavior*
- *Don't seem to have a self-protective urge about themselves, are not afraid of strangers, wander off easily, participate in high-risk activities or put themselves in dangerous situations*
- *Blurts out personal information, talks to strangers about their abuse, or want to go home with people they don't know. Ask very personal questions out loud in public places or shares too much information with unfamiliar people*

As you parent your foster children, think about how they are learning boundaries at all different **stages of development**.



Infancy: Parent recognizes and meets the baby's needs consistently and provides respectful physical care. Baby internalizes a sense of trust & safety from a parent's co-regulation.

Toddler: Toddler develops self-care and autonomous skills. Begins to develop preferences, is curious and explores, but is kept safe by parent. Parent allows for development of individual but also provides age-appropriate structure.

Preschool: Begins to develop relationship skills such as sharing and playing with others and group settings. Parent provides structure for learning social skills and guiding in how to play with others. Develops empathy and discovers own individual preferences and likes.

Grade School: Internalizes rules to interact with others, developing skills and ability to function in groups. Operates more independently. Friendships become more important. Can be rejected for hurtful behavior to others.

Adolescence: Relationships and developing an identity become a focus. Beginning dating and intimacy skills. More freedom and autonomy. Takes more physical and social risks. May push against authority.

How Do We Help Children Learn And Respect Boundaries?

Practice Trauma Informed Parenting

We strongly encourage all foster parents to learn about trauma informed parenting strategies to help them best work with children and youth from backgrounds of abuse, neglect, and trauma. These classes help you understand how a child (and their brain) is impacted by in utero or early trauma and how this impacts how they function in a family. One of these parenting strategies is called *Trust Based Relational Intervention* or TBRI.



“If a child needs nurture and I give him structure, I harm his ability to trust me. If a child needs structure and I give him nurture, I harm his ability to grow.”

-Dr. Karyn Purvis

TBRI is trauma informed parenting model focused on learning skills to help children from hard beginnings learn to trust and learn appropriate social skills. TBRI emphasizes that children need *connection* with a caring caregiver in order to learn to trust; they need to be *empowered* in order to learn how to recognize their needs and how to get them met appropriately; and they need positive *correction* in order to be able to grow as a human who is able to interact with others. The balance of **nurture** and **structure** is critical for developing boundaries and self-regulation as well as allowing a child to flourish as an individual with feelings, thoughts and dreams.

Model Respect For Boundaries

A powerful way to teach boundaries to a child is through modeling. How you act and how you treat people is the first and most powerful teacher your children have. Your model of behavior sets a standard of how you expect others to act. If you are respectful, deal with your disappointment in positive ways, and model assertive, not aggressive behavior, you give your foster children a firsthand example of how you want them to act. Other examples include knocking on a door before entering, or letting someone know when their touch is inappropriate, or resolving a disagreement in a positive way. If you treat birth parents and social workers with respect, children learn to trust these people and treat them with respect as well.

Teach Boundaries Around Touch

Boys Town is a treatment program that works with behaviorally challenged children. The Boys Town program spends significant time helping youth learn boundaries and appropriate ways of interacting with other. For example, for a child who constantly wants to touch others, some suggestions from the Boys Town Training Manual **Rebuilding Children's Lives** might be helpful.

- Teach the child how to ask before they hug you. Model saying “no” to touch and help children learn to be able to pay attention to how others are feeling about being touched.
- Teach a child about personal circles (for younger children, draw pictures and color in the “circles” or trace your child’s body onto butcher paper and draw a halo or circle around the tracing.) One is your personal space that you only invite family and friends into. The next is a larger circle where you shake hands or pat their backs. And the next is a more distant space, where you may only wave at people or talk to people you don’t know well at a distance.
- Teach the child about personal space. One way to make that concrete is to teach a child to stand an arm’s length away while talking with others.

If a child has been sexually abused and needs to learn to feel safe within their own body, you will need to use special care and sensitivity. Ask permission to touch a child, such as, “I’m so proud of you, I’d like to give you

a hug. Would that be okay?” If the child says no or move away from you, answer back. “Looks like you don’t want a hug right now. That’s okay.” This models respect and helps a child feel good about establishing their own boundaries.

Teach Social Skills

When teaching boundaries, focusing on positive social skills can be very helpful. A *Social Skill* refers to a desired way to interact with other people. Children must learn these—they are not born with these skills. The Boys Town program takes a social skill and breaks it down into steps and at a time when the child is calm, teaches one step at a time. It also includes talking about the reasons why acting this way is better than acting a destructive or negative way. The child practices and the foster parent gives feedback. At the end of the practice, the child is reminded to use his skill. If he uses it, the foster parent praises him, so that the child will be more likely to repeat it. Here are two examples of common social skills broken down into steps.

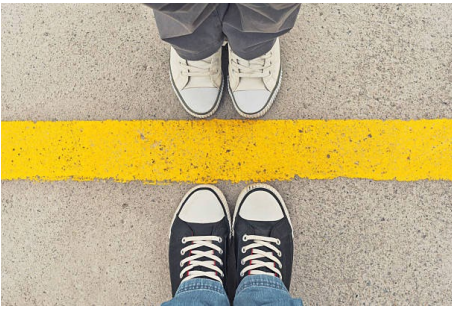
Disagreeing with Others

1. Remain calm and look at the person
2. Begin with a positive or neutral statement
3. Explain why you disagree with the decision
4. Listen as the other person gives their side of the story
5. Calmly accept whatever decision is made
6. Thank the person for listening regardless of outcome

Accepting No

1. Look at the person
2. Say “Okay”
3. Calmly ask for a reason if you really don’t understand
4. If you disagree, bring it up later

You get the idea. You are “pre-teaching” ways for children to learn to accept no, to disagree without getting in trouble, and to be more pleasant to be around. Social skills are a way to teach boundaries. When we teach children and adolescents these skills, they are more likely to use them!



Boundaries in Your Foster Home

Section 3: Establish and Promote Good Boundaries for All Family Members

By setting boundaries, we're not only voicing our own needs and preferences but also acknowledging and respecting those of others. Boundaries allow us to navigate our shared spaces and interactions with care and consideration. Maintaining boundaries helps a foster parent with the responsibility of keeping children and youth emotionally, mentally, and physically safe in the home and from the actions of other family members.

House Rules

It is strongly encouraged that all foster homes establish some basic house rules. House rules refer to the general guidelines for behavior that all family members are expected to follow. House rules should focus on the safety and comfort of all family members. For families with young children, keep your rules simple and limited. With older children and teens, you can have more rules. House rules don't need to cover every situation, but they should be simple rules that everyone (including adults) should be able to follow).

When possible, put your house rules in positive words. And rules don't work unless someone knows about them! Think about how you are going to get your rules across to children. You can write them out and post them. Or when a child enters your home, have a house meeting to review the rules. Repeat the rules often and refer to the house rules when children forget or break the rules. Remind young children about rules before a new situation, going to the store or in preparation of an activity.

SAMPLE OF HOUSE RULES

House Rules focus on safety and comfort and apply to everyone in the household.

- ☐ Use respectful language.
- ☐ Safe in our bodies--no hurting others.
- ☐ No harming or destroying personal property.
- ☐ Get permission before touching or using other people's things.
- ☐ Use your words, not your fists.
- ☐ Phone calls between 6 and 9 p.m. only.
- ☐ Chores and homework done before TV.
- ☐ Get permission before you leave the house.
- ☐ Always wear clothes, robe or pajamas in shared spaces.

Maintaining Boundaries For Your Family Members

House rules, adult supervision and quick attention to inappropriate touching are all important tools to keep healthy boundaries between family members. Your children (both foster and birth) need adults to help keep a safe environment for all family members. That means you may need to set limits and rules around sensitive areas that could become a problem.

- Set limits around sexually explicit talk or vulgar language.
- If a foster child is always getting into other children's things, set a limit about not playing with other's toys without permission.
- Address language or communication immediately such as name calling or cruel teasing.

The need for boundaries extends to our own immediate and extended family members. Some family members may speak in a hurtful way to a child or talks derogatorily about a child's extended family, race, gender, sexual identity, or nationality. Address the issue promptly. Do not allow family members to engage in cruel or incessant teasing or nick names that are hurtful. It can be hard to have that conversation with your relative, but your foster child has no one else to protect them. You may need to restrict contact and access if a family member refuses to change their behavior. Be aware of signs of unhealthy boundaries, such as excessive intrusion, lack of respect for privacy, or emotional manipulation. Be careful in allowing roughhousing, teasing or wrestling all that can become hurtful in a very quick fashion.

Set boundaries for the people who interact with your foster child to provide a good experience and ensure safety for a child.

Supervision and Child Care

Establishing boundaries for your family also means being aware and responsible for which adults have contact with your children and the nature of that contact. Foster parents need to follow the licensing regulations around appropriate substitute caregivers. This means identifying safe people who you can trust to care for a child. This also means making sure adults with criminal backgrounds are not allowed to have extended contact or supervisory responsibility for children. That might also mean that person (even if a family member) may not be able to live in your home.

As a foster parent, you need to be keenly aware of your own behavior and avoid any actions that intrude on the physical or emotional safety of a child. Foster parents are prohibited from cultivating a romantic relationship with a foster child. Foster parents should keep good boundaries by avoiding situations such as sleeping in the same bed, a foster father taking his foster daughter on an overnight trip alone, and adolescents sitting in a foster parent's lap. These may in fact not lead to anything sexual or harmful, but the boundaries of safety and limits between foster parent and child have been compromised. It is important for children's safety (and for foster parents) that healthy, firm boundaries are maintained. And that's your responsibility as that child's foster parent.

ALASKA CENTER FOR RESOURCE FAMILIES SELF-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FOSTER PARENTS

ITP Topic: Boundaries & Touch

COURSE: BOUNDARIES IN FOSTER CARE, PART 2: MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES IN YOUR FOSTER HOME

2.5 TRAINING CREDITS

Please read the above entitled self-study. Then complete the questionnaire found on the following pages. Try answering the questions first from your understanding of the material before referring back to the course. These questions pertain specifically to the course which you have read.

After you have answered all the questions, please **send your completed questionnaire to the Alaska Center for Resource Families, 3429 Airport Way, Suite 202A, Fairbanks, Alaska 99709**. We will score your answers and credit your training record with 2.5 training credits. A score of 70% correct or better will entitle you to receive the training credit. In the event your score is less than 70% correct, we will contact you to determine if you wish to review the material and retake the questionnaire.

If you have questions or concerns about this self-study course, please call us on our toll-free line at 1-800-478-7307 Fairbanks. Anchorage: 279-1799.

The following section is an evaluation of the self-study materials. Please fill it out upon completion of the questionnaire and return this page to us with the rest of the course materials. Thank you for your time and comments. It helps us provide appropriate training to meet the needs of foster parents.

*******EVALUATION OF SELF-STUDY MATERIALS*******

Please complete the following questions.

1. Did this self-study course meet with your expectations? ____YES ____NO
2. How would you rate the written presentation of information on the topic?
____Excellent ____Good ____Fair ____Poor
3. Did this course add to your knowledge and/or skills? ____YES ____NO
4. Comments/Concerns:

Boundaries in Foster Care PT 2: Maintaining Boundaries In Your Foster Home**2.5 Credits****NAME:** _____ **PHONE NO.:** _____*Only one person per questionnaire. Feel free to make additional copies if needed.***ADDRESS:** _____*Street or Post Office**City/State**Zip***EMAIL:** _____

☐ **YES! I would like to receive ACRF email.** *(Includes Training Tracks Newsletter, training reminders and community events or training of interest for resource families)*

Are you a foster parent? ☐ YES ☐ NO If YES, what is your Foster Home License #: _____

If NO, please check one: ☐ Pending Foster Parent ☐ OCS ☐ Birth Parent ☐ Adoptive Parent

☐ Residential Treatment Facility (License #: _____) ☐ Agency: _____

☐ Other *(please specify)*: _____

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Check or fill in the appropriate answer to the following questions. Try filling out the questionnaire first from what you remember from the self-study course. Then review the reading if necessary.

1. Boundaries exist in five areas. What are they?

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

2. The best strategy for a foster parent to maintain their own boundaries is to take care of themselves physically, emotionally and socially.

_____ a. TRUE

_____ b. FALSE

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

PAGE 2 – BOUNDARIES IN FOSTER CARE, PART TWO

3. This self-study explores the idea of a “mantra” or phrase to say to yourself to help keep you focused in a positive way. Give two (2) examples of a mantra either given in the self-study or ones that you like to use.

a. _____

b. _____

4. Babies are born with the internal boundaries that they will have for the rest of their lives.

_____ a. TRUE

_____ b. FALSE

5. Sharing too much personal and confidential information about your foster child with your relatives or other foster parents is an example of poor boundaries.

_____ a. TRUE

_____ b. FALSE

6. What are two signs that a child may be having boundary problems?

a. _____

b. _____

7. What are ways the foster parents can teach a child boundaries?

_____ a. Model respect for boundaries

_____ b. Teach boundaries around touch

_____ c. Teach social skills

_____ d. Practice trauma informed parenting strategies

_____ e. All of the above

8. A _____ refer to a desired way to interact with other people.
(FILL IN THE BLANKS)

9. Trust Based Relational Intervention or TBRI teaches that _____ and _____ are both critical for developing boundaries and self-regulation. (FILL IN THE BLANKS)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

PAGE 3 – BOUNDARIES IN FOSTER CARE, PART TWO

10. Give two examples of house rules that could provide safety and comfort to all family members.

a. _____

b. _____

11. It is the foster parent's responsibility to set limits if family members speak in a hurtful way to a child or talk badly about a child's birth parents or extended family.

_____ a. TRUE

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12. Establishing boundaries for your family means always being aware and responsible for which adults have contact with your children.

_____ a. TRUE

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FOR SCORING AND TRAINING CREDIT OF 2.5 CREDITS, RETURN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE TO:

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OR FAX TO: 1-907-290-8765

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ITP Topic: Boundaries & Touch

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11. It is the foster parent's responsibility to set limits if family members speak in a hurtful way to a child or talk badly about a child's birth parents or extended family.

_____ a. TRUE

_____ b. FALSE

12. Establishing boundaries for your family means always being aware and responsible for which adults have contact with your children.

_____ a. TRUE

_____ b. FALSE

FOR SCORING AND TRAINING CREDIT OF 2.5 CREDITS, RETURN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE TO:

**Alaska Center for Resource Families
3429 Airport Way, Suite 202A
Fairbanks, AK 99709**

OR FAX TO: 1-907-290-8765