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### Limit Setting with Children

If you have children or work with children, you know the importance of setting appropriate limits. Limits provide children and adolescents with security as well as an opportunity to learn self-control and responsibility. For many years I have coached parents in using this limit setting technique. I used it with my own kids when they were young, and it's what I use with children in my office. If it is used **consistently** I can almost guarantee success. It takes practice and you should be prepared for children to test you to see if you are serious. But stay consistent and you will see results!

### 3 Steps A.C.T.

- 1. Acknowledge the child's feeling, wishes, and wants.** Verbalizing that you understand the child's feelings often helps decrease the intensity of the feelings.  
For example, "I understand that you want..."  
"I hear you feel strongly about..."  
"You really want..."
- 2. Communicate the Limit.** Give clear specific limits.  
For example, "But we are not having candy this close to supper time."
- 3. Target an acceptable alternative.**  
For example, "We are not having candy this close to supper. You may have an apple if you'd like."

Patience is key. Stay calm. You may have to go through the sequence 2-3 times (or more at the beginning) before the child understands that you are not giving in. If after the limit is set, the child breaks the limit, then the ultimate choice is given. This step must be carefully stated so the child clearly understands he/she has a choice and that whatever happens will be the result of his/her choice. For example, "If you choose to throw that toy again then you choose not to play with it anymore today." Or "If you choose to hit your friend again then you choose to have her go home."

**No debates or lengthy explanations.** At this point, it is important that apologies, tears, tantrums do not undo the choice the child has made.

Good luck. Give it a try and let me know how it works for you. Remember, Be consistent!

ACT limit setting technique is from:  
Landreth, G (1991). *Play therapy: The Art of the Relationship*. Bristol, PA:  
Accelerated Development.

**Children need to realize that they have choices and that consequences are related to those choices.**

**About Gretchen...** I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice in Charlotte N.C. I am a 1986 graduate of the UNC Chapel Hill School of Social Work with a concentration in mental health. For the past 24 years, I have worked with adults, children, and families helping families improve their functioning so that all members of the family can reach their full potential.

**Services Provided...** Individual therapy for children, adolescents, and adults, Play therapy for children ages 2 years and older, Family therapy.

Please visit my website for more information. [www.gretchenwoosley.com](http://www.gretchenwoosley.com)