



Volunteer Learning Series: Setting Boundaries

Boundaries refers to the rules, guidelines, limits, and standards related to behavior (Search Institute, 2007).

Why is it important to set boundaries? Setting boundaries is healthy for you and the people around you. You'll likely have different boundaries with different people in your life, and it's important that you're clear about what those boundaries are so that the people around you understand what they should and should not do in their relationships with you. Boundaries provide structure to your relationships.

As a new volunteer leader working with youth and their parents or guardians, you would be wise to consider and establish a set of boundaries before you take on your leadership role. Think about the question:

"What are your limits in the relationships that you will build with other adults and youth?" Inappropriate (or nonexistent) boundaries are harmful to everyone involved in settings with youth and adults, such as 4-H clubs and groups. By setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, you will avoid the following:

- Burning out prematurely.
- Feeling responsible for more than is really the case.
- Feeling used, disrespected, and taken advantage of.
- Developing a victim mentality.
- Feeling like you can't say no to any request.
- Having youth and parents become overly dependent on you.
- Blaming.
- Developing one-sided relationships with no give and take.

Since being a volunteer leader inevitably involves relationships with other people, you'll need to decide what boundaries you want and need to establish with youth and adult participants. People have different standards and behaviors when interacting with different people.

It's easier to set strong boundaries from the start and relax them over time than it is to strengthen weak boundaries. Talk to other volunteer leaders and the program coordinator for help in setting boundaries.

General Boundary Statements

- Friends or acquaintances stop by with no notice.
- A child swears or uses vulgar language directed at you.
- A family member borrows something of yours without asking.
- Someone calls you at midnight about an issue that is not an emergency.
- A friend hugs you.
- Your boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse reads your text messages without your knowledge or permission.
- An acquaintance makes a racist or sexist remark.
- A friend asks you to loan her some money.
- Someone you just met hugs you to say goodbye.
- A colleague swears or uses vulgar language in the course of regular conversation.
- A friend or family member is 15 minutes late to meet you for coffee without notice.



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- A houseguest uses some of your personal hygiene products.
- A colleague asks you to tell your boss a lie so that he doesn't get in trouble.
- Your sibling asks you to lie to help pull off a surprise for his or her spouse.
- Your boss tells you that you need to work late or over the weekend with little notice.
- You are out for lunch with coworkers and they start to gossip about other colleagues.
- A coworker borrows your stapler without asking.
- A friend tags you in an unflattering picture on social media.
- A friend asks you for money.
- Your boss or another adult sends you a friend request on Social Media.

Program-Specific Boundary Statements

- A youth participant and his or her parent or guardian call you at work.
- A family visits your home.
- You're having dinner with a 4-H family.
- A youth participant hugs you.
- A parent hugs you.
- You go to a movie with a program family.
- You receive frequent phone calls from parents who want to talk about one of the youth participants in your club or group.
- You offer advice to a youth participant's parent.
- A youth participant sends you a friend request on Facebook.
- A parent sends you a friend request on Facebook.

References

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