One key skill all kids need to learn is how to set limits for themselves. For children whose parents have always set the limits, leaving home for the first time can be a wild experience. So much freedom, so little experience!

How do children learn to say "no" to themselves? Like everything else, they need practice.

Learning to Set Their Own Limits

When our daughter was in elementary school, she was allowed to choose how much dessert to eat after dinner. You'd think that would have brought her great pleasure - but in fact it was quite the opposite. She wrestled with just how many pieces of candy she should have and she wanted us to decide - not her!

She would ask us how many pieces she should have. We responded "Take what you think is a reasonable amount." At which point she demanded back "Well, what is a reasonable amount?" It went on this way night after night. Eventually she developed the ability to decide for herself and set her own limits without checking first with us.

Helping Your Kids Develop Moderation

Messages pour into our children about all the wonderful things they should have - from the latest video games to the best tennis shoes. Do our children need all these things? No, but they certainly want them!

We are left with the challenging task of teaching our children the difference between needs and wants. Learning moderation around spending money and finding out that you can't always have what you want are not easy lessons. It's hard to say "no" to your kids when all the other kids seem to have it. However, if you want your kids to learn moderation, you have to be able to say no and stick with it.

When our son was preparing a list of all the things he would need for Junior High, he put a cellphone on the list. This led to a good discussion on the difference between wants and needs. While it was something he wanted, it was definitely nothing he needed.

When Moderation Fails, Addiction May Follow

Our world provides many opportunities to go overboard and without moderation we can get in serious trouble. Part of the issue is that our brains are susceptible to addiction. We quickly become accustomed to one level and want more - whether it's food, video games, drugs, alcohol, shopping or the internet.

If you have ever tried to help someone get over an addiction, you know how challenging it is. We lost the battle with my mother-in-law's addiction to alcohol and she eventually died from it. Once someone is addicted, their ability to set reasonable limits on their own behavior is greatly reduced. It is far better to use moderation and avoid addiction in the first place.

An international study of video gaming among kids found about 9% of children in grades 3 - 8 were pathological gamers - resulting in depression, anxiety, social phobias, and lower school performance. Until your children learn to set reasonable limits for themselves, you need to do it for them.
One parent who reviewed the book Video Games & Your Kids: How Parents Stay in Control wrote "I would strongly recommend this book, particularly to parents of young children who are playing video games. It details how gaming can become a serious problem and what steps to take to prevent it from happening. We have a 16 year old who became addicted to a game called World of Warcraft. If not for our own experience, I would have thought that the consequences of too much gaming that the book talks about are exaggerated, however, they are NOT exaggerated, as our child suffers from almost all of them. I wish I had this book 5 years ago. It is the first that I am aware of to address the growing problem of video game addiction."

Helping Your Kids Practice Setting Limits

When your kids are younger, you need to be more actively involved in setting limits. This is one of the primary reasons experts recommend that children not be allowed to have TV and computers in their bedrooms. It's too hard to monitor what's going on so you can help set reasonable limits.

Once they are in elementary school, you and your children can discuss what limits should be set around things like screen time. After you have an agreement, they will likely still need help abiding by those limits. By the time they are in high school, they need to be taking most of the responsibility for setting their own limits. Since they'll soon be out on their own, you want to give them plenty of practice when you are still nearby.

Another area for your kids to practice setting their own limits is around going to bed and getting up. Most kids can handle this sometime during the elementary school years. One mom was complaining about how hard it was to get her teen out of bed in the mornings. When she realized she could turn this responsibility over to him, both their lives became better. She stopped nagging him out of bed and he enjoyed feeling competent about getting up himself.

Your children need to learn is that they are ultimately responsible for setting their own limits. Kids who can set healthy limits for themselves do better in life. Teaching your kids moderation is a gift they will enjoy their entire lives.


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