

YOUR ROLE IN GUIDING PLAY: WHEN AND HOW TO SET LIMITS ¹⁵

You can help children direct their own play while still paying attention to boundaries, risks and appropriate behaviour for the setting. It's best to prepare for this ahead of time rather than just reacting in the moment.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS ON GUIDING CHILDREN'S PLAY:

SETTING LIMITS

Give clear, realistic rules that are right for the child's age and development.

For example:

"You can use the large, open, grassy area for fast running."

"This is the area for messy, muddy play. This is where we wash up afterwards."

REDIRECTION

You might need to distract a child or give them a different object or activity. For example, if a child is throwing balls where they might hurt someone or break something, you can give them some containers (like boxes, yogurt tubs, buckets) so that they're aiming the balls somewhere safer.

CHOICES INSTEAD OF YES OR NO

Help children make better decisions by offering choices instead of giving yes or no questions.

If redirection is needed, be sure it is a choice and not a threat. "You can use the stairs to get to the top of the slide or you can choose a different activity. Your choice."

POSITIVE WORDING

Children will respond better to what you DO want them to do, rather than what you DON'T want them to do. For example, if a child is throwing balls at a window, you could say “This blank wall is a safe place for you to practice your throwing.” Even better, you can ask the child to think about the problems with throwing at a window, and ask them if they can think of a better place to practice throwing.

POSITIVE AND SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

You can support children’s social and emotional skills by being specific and encouraging instead of offering general praise. For example, imagine a child puts their own outdoor materials away at tidy-up time and then goes to help a sibling. You might normally praise them by saying “Good job!”. Instead, try to say something that develops their sense of responsibility and awareness, like “You saw that your brother was having trouble with that heavy plank, so you helped them take it to the shed. That was very helpful. Thank you.”

CONSEQUENCES

A consequence is a response or result that follows a behaviour. Children can learn from their decision if the consequences are clear ahead of time, if the consequences relate to the choice or action and if the consequences are consistent.

A consequence could be natural, logical or illogical. **The best way to build children’s skills is to use natural or logical consequences.** For example, a natural consequence for a child who throws all of the balls out of reach (like onto a roof or down a ravine) is that there are no balls left to play with. A logical consequence would be to give the child a choice to throw the balls into containers or have the balls put away. An illogical consequence would be to tell the child they will not get their snack. The snack has nothing to do with the ball throwing, so it doesn’t make sense to the child.