

CPI Info Capsule

The Art of Setting Limits



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Setting limits is one of the most powerful tools that professionals have to promote positive behavior change for their clients, students, residents, patients, etc. Knowing there are limits on their behavior helps the individuals in your charge feel safe. It also helps them learn to make appropriate choices.

There are many ways to go about setting limits, but staff members who use these techniques must keep three things in mind:

✓ **Setting a limit is not the same as issuing an ultimatum.**

Limits aren't threats—*If you don't attend group, your weekend privileges will be suspended.*

Limits offer choices with consequences—*If you attend group and follow the other steps in your plan, you'll be able to attend all of the special activities this weekend. If you don't attend group, then you'll have to stay behind. It's your decision.*

✓ **The purpose of limits is to teach, not to punish.**

Through limits, people begin to understand that their actions, positive or negative, result in predictable consequences. By giving such choices and consequences, staff members provide a structure for good decision making.

✓ **Setting limits is more about listening than talking.**

Taking the time to really listen to those in your charge will help you better understand their thoughts and feelings. By listening, you will learn more about what's important to them, and that will help you set more meaningful limits.

CPI's Five-Step Approach to Setting Limits

CPI's Five-Step Approach to Setting Limits is a productive way to deal with out-of-control individuals.

1. Explain which behavior is inappropriate.

Saying "Stop that!" may not be enough. The person may not know if you are objecting to how loudly he is talking or objecting to the language that he is using. Be specific.

2. Explain why the behavior is inappropriate.

Again, don't assume that the person knows why her behavior is not acceptable. Is she disturbing others? Being disrespectful? Not doing a task she's been assigned?

3. Give reasonable choices with consequences.

Instead of issuing an ultimatum ("Do this or else"), tell the person what his choices are, and what the consequences of those choices will be. Ultimatums often lead to power struggles because no one wants to be forced to do something. By providing choices with consequences, you are admitting that you cannot force his decision. But you can determine what the consequences for his choices will be.

4. Allow time.

Generally, it's best to allow the person a few moments to make her decision. Remember that if she's upset, she may not be thinking clearly. It may take longer for her to think through what you've said to her.

5. Be prepared to enforce your consequences.

Limit setting is meaningless if you don't consistently enforce the consequences you've set. For that reason, it's important to set consequences that are reasonable, enforceable, within your authority, and within the policies and procedures of your facility or school.

Limits are powerful tools for teaching appropriate behavior. Their purpose is not to show who's boss, but to give the individuals in your charge guidance, respect, and a feeling of security.

About CPI

CPI is an international training organization that specializes in the safe management of disruptive and assaultive behavior. Since 1980, more than six million professionals have participated in CPI's training programs, and thousands of organizations worldwide have successfully implemented CPI's safe, nonharmful techniques and developed comprehensive crisis prevention and intervention plans.

CPI's *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*[®] training and the *Prepare Training*[®] program focus on prevention and offer proven strategies for safely defusing anxious, hostile, or violent behavior at the earliest possible stage. Additionally, the CPI Matters at Work series offers seminars on a variety of issues that impact today's work environments. CPI offers training both on site and at select locations in more than 150 cities worldwide. For more information, visit crisisprevention.com or call **800.558.8976**.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, D.C.: Author.