

Boundaries

What are they? Why do we need them? What do they do? How do I set them?

Having appropriate boundaries is an important part of working in the mental health field. Boundaries can make the difference between a manageable situation and an impossible one. If you set good, clear boundaries early, confusion can be minimized. However, if you have good boundaries but are not making them clear, the line can get fuzzy and others may get confused. Boundaries are like imaginary lines that you draw in the sand to tell other people “this is what I can do; this is what I cannot do.” Boundaries provide protection, clarity and comfort.

Have you ever been in a situation where you asked someone to help you but their response was so vague that you weren’t sure if they were going to do what you requested or not? That is an example of an unclear boundary. You may have felt yourself wanting to clarify: “Will you or won’t you?” You were hoping that this person would make an unclear situation clear so that there is no confusion.

The same is true for our families and the children that we serve. If you don’t tell the families that they cannot call you at home, or show up on your doorstep, how will they know that this is a boundary you have set?

So, let’s take a look at what boundaries are, why we need them, and what they do once we set them.

What are they?

bound-ary

Pronunciation: 'baun-d(&-)rE

Function: *noun*

Inflected Form(s): *plural -aries*

: something (as a line, point, or plane) that indicates or fixes a limit or extent Something that indicates a border or limit.

Available online at: <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

Why do we need them?

- Boundaries help keep things separate.
- Boundaries keep roles clear.
- Boundaries let us know when we’ve gone too far.

What do they do?

Boundaries help us define what we can and cannot do; what we should and should not do...

- I cannot give you my home address
- I cannot take on another client – I am overwhelmed
- I should not take my client with me to meet my friends

**Okay, now I know WHY I need boundaries, HOW do I set them?
Here are some examples:**

Kid-to-Kid Boundaries

- Let's keep our hands to ourselves.
- No kicking each other.
- Everyone included in this activity.
- No sharing telephone numbers; ask your parents first.

Staff-to-Family

- Set respectful limits
- Be polite
- Don't take over their parental role
- Always ask permission

Staff-to-Staff Boundaries

- Be respectful. Have a "golden rule" mindset.
- Don't ask someone to do something you yourself would not do.
- Be careful of romance in the workplace.

Kid-to-Staff Boundaries

- I'm sorry, but you can't call me at home.
- I'm sorry but you can't come home with me.
- You can't buy me presents – I can't buy you presents.
- I should not force my views on you.

Work-to-Home Boundaries

- Make sure you keep work at work; home at home
- Always respect confidentiality.
- Remember to take care of yourself
- Keep your eyes open for burnout

When you think about it, you're setting boundaries all the time, every day of the week with every person you come in contact with. We're just not always conscious about it. In this profession, we have to be deliberate and intentional with our families as well as with our colleagues, personal relationships, and with ourselves in setting boundaries, maintaining boundaries and respecting our boundaries.

final thought...

I think I have good boundaries, but how do I make them even better?

By taking the time to notice the boundaries that you have set will make you more aware of those boundaries you still need to set, or maybe make clearer.