



Family Values

Boundaries

Boundaries and Family

Bruce Strade, Chief Operating Officer, Lutheran Community Services Northwest

Nowhere are boundaries more important than in a family. Clear boundaries allow for individuality, while fuzzy boundaries create identity confusion. In a family where boundaries are respected, people are given space, privacy and a right to their own opinions. In addition, they are able to say “no” when asked to do something they don’t want to do and to disagree without other family members feeling hurt or discounted. Healthy families see each member as an individual, unique gift of God. Just as God addresses each of us by name in baptism, thus emphasizing our separateness, so families also need to value each person as separate and special.

When boundaries are unclear, family identity becomes more important than individual identity. There is a tendency toward “group” think as opposed to individual opinions or ideas. In these families, an unspoken rule might be: “Agreement at all costs!” Also, people do not ask for what they want because the expectation is that the other people should know what I want, especially if they love me. In addition, conflict tends to be avoided, since it forces people to individuate, or issues are diverted through a third person. When carried to the extreme, these families can be very controlling and resort to physical violence when a member gets out-of-line.

Because the influence of family is so strong, we can spend our entire lives either replicating our family of origin or trying to free ourselves from its strangle hold on us. Witness the fact that when we visit our parents or our siblings, it does not take long before we revert back to those familiar roles and patterns of the past. Suddenly you become the “baby” of the family again or you are taking care of everyone or you feel inferior to everyone else in the room. The family force is hard to resist.

The following are some tips in boundary setting for families:

(Remember that dependency is appropriate for small children, but the older they get the more independent they become)

1. **Appreciate each family member as separate and unique.** *Celebrate the gifts and differences of each person. Encourage each person’s special strengths.*
2. **Have separate relationships with each family member.** *Spend time alone together. Take one child along to the store. Have special time with your spouse.*
3. **Respect each person’s privacy and space.** *This means that it is important not to intrude or force your way into another person’s space, either through intimidation, hitting, reading diaries, etc.*
4. **Encourage people to ask for what they want.** *Try not to second-guess family members.*
5. **Honor the limits people set.** *If a child says, “Stop tickling,” stop. If your spouse says, “I don’t want to talk about it now,” respect that.*
6. **Talk directly to the person in the family you have an issue with.** *Parents may consult with each other so that they are together in respect to the kids.*
7. **Allow family members to have his/her own friends outside the family.** *Not everyone in the family will have the exact same friends, including spouses.*
8. **Accommodate out of consideration and change family patterns that are not working.** *There are times we do things we may not want to because we care. Compassion motivates us to change so that our relationships can grow.*

See also: Drs. Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, c.1992.

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