



## Boundaries Not Walls

**W**hat exactly does the phrase “develop good boundaries,” a phrase often used in therapy, really mean? It doesn’t mean building thick walls for protection.

Walls can be impenetrable and only serve to isolate.

Boundaries define who we are and who we are not.

The purpose of setting healthy boundaries is to develop a good sense of self along with a strong sense of safety and security, emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Learning to respect and to love ourselves allows us to become close to others and to develop relationships without the threat of losing oneself, smothering another, invading another’s privacy or personal space, or being invaded or taken advantage of by another.

Melody Beattie in *Beyond Codependency* states that “setting boundaries is about learning to take care of ourselves, no matter what happens, where we go, or who we’re with.”

- Boundaries emerge from deep decisions about what we do and don’t deserve.
- Boundaries emerge from the belief that what we want and need, like and dislike, is important.
- Boundaries emerge from a deeper sense of our personal rights, especially the right we have to take care of ourselves and to be ourselves.
- Boundaries emerge as we learn to value, trust, and listen to ourselves and to God’s Spirit.
- Boundaries enable us to be both separate and connected.

When the boundaries listed above have been developed, a healthy sense of self emerges.

How do we learn to set appropriate boundaries in our lives and relationships?

Family therapists help clients to claim their own voice, to speak up for themselves. It is important to tell others when they are speaking or acting in ways that are not acceptable or make one uncomfortable. It is a right and responsibility to protect and defend oneself and to insist on respect.

Likewise, it is important to learn to recognize and acknowledge personal feelings and emotions and to express them in an appropriate manner. This is often done verbally by using “I” statements. For example, “I feel hurt by that remark” or “I feel angry that you ignored me in that way.”

Family influence plays a strong role in healthy emotional development. Children learn to respect themselves and others by witnessing the way family members treat each other.

Experiencing physical, sexual, emotional, or verbal abuse at a young age sets the stage for unhealthy adult relationships.

In such families, there is no model for healthy boundary setting, in contrast to the experience of children raised in a warm, nurturing family where individual needs are respected and met. As adults we choose

whether to allow our family experience to influence us by first recognizing whether it was positive or negative, healthy or unhealthy, and then deciding what role it will play in our life.

### Unhealthy boundaries include

- Being too open with personal information.
- Expecting others to share personal information inappropriately.
- Being too private, and shutting others out.
- Behaving in ways that offend others.
- Being overly sensitive to other's reactions.
- Disrespecting another's space, property, information, or feelings.
- Not following through on promises and commitments.
- Showing disregard for the rights of others.
- Allowing others to treat one disrespectfully.
- Allowing or perpetrating violent behaviour in a relationship.

Boundaries become walls when limits are set out of anxiety, fear, or embarrassment.

Avoiding talking about something may let others unintentionally violate the boundary, and anger or resentment may then result, creating distance.

These walls or barricades may occur in every kind of relationship including family, friendships, and work.

### How to set healthy boundaries

- Define the roles you play in the lives of others and clarify them through discussion.
- Consider the boundary from both the point of view of the other person and yourself.
- Be proactive, not just reactive.
- Talk about the situation.
- Express needs and feelings with empathy and clarity.
- Be honest about fears and discomfort in a situation.
- Be assertive but not aggressive in communication with others.

When safety is an issue, boundaries must be very clear and steps taken to ensure they are not violated.

IFL therapists seek to help clients develop and maintain good personal and relational boundaries as essential to a healthy, balanced lifestyle.

*by Lindsay Watson,  
MA, RMFT*

#### **For Further Reading:**

Cloud, Henry and Townsend, John. *Boundaries: When to Say Yes When to Say No, To Take Control of Your Life*. Zondervan Corp. Publishers, 2001.

Beattie, Melody. *Beyond Codependency: And Getting Better All the Time*. Hazelden Publishers, 1989.

Linden, Anne. *Boundaries in Human Relationships: How to be Separate and Connected*. Crown House Publishing, 2008.



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