

Setting and Keeping Boundaries - Adfam Website Download

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What are boundaries?

One of the definitions offered by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is: a boundary is a limit on what is reasonable.

Effective boundaries are the foundation of all healthy relationships; they help to develop trust, stability and respect.

Families of substance users can set boundaries to limit the behaviour of the user to what is considered reasonable. They assert the needs or rights of families so they feel secure and respected.

An example of boundaries with a substance user

Emma has been a heroin user for nine months. She initially funded her use by borrowing money from her family and then later by stealing from the family home. Her parents were unaware of this until she was arrested for possession of a Class A drug and then spoke to her about her drug use.

Emma's parents don't want her to steal from the family again and don't want to lend her money for drugs. They need to set two boundaries: For Emma not to steal from the family and to not lend Emma money for drugs.

The three stages of setting and keeping a boundary

- Defining the boundary
- Setting the boundary
- Keeping the boundary.

In reality a boundary often needs re-setting and modifying many times. These three steps then repeat in a process of defining, setting and keeping; learning from what happened and then re-defining, re-setting, re-keeping, and so on. This process is usually helped if family members support each other and have the support of professionals.

The advantages of setting boundaries

- They invite the user to be more responsible for their behaviour
- They model a healthier and safer way of relating between people
- They help families to reduce the impact of substance use and its associated behaviour on their lives
- They help the whole family to break down the roles that members can get stuck in, such as the user being dependent or a parent being a carer.

You can't change someone else. What you can change is your response to a situation. This change may in turn invite a change from the other person. This is the thinking behind the idea that if you want to change someone else - then change yourself.

Defining a boundary

Below is a checklist of questions and notes to help you define or formulate a boundary.

- **Firstly, what exactly is the issue** that you want the boundary to deal with?
- **What do you need to achieve?**
- **What is your real motive** for setting this boundary? Does it come from your anger or from your thinking?
- **Would you accept this behaviour from someone who didn't use substances?** Ask yourself if it is necessary to treat the user differently just because they happen to use?
- **Define the boundary about the user's behaviour and not them as a person**, e.g. a boundary about their drug use in the house could be phrased as 'I don't want you to use in our home' rather than 'I don't want you in the home when you're using'
- **Does the boundary encourage the user to be responsible** for their life, their behaviour and the choices they make? Or does it treat the user as if they were a 'child'?
- **What are the risks** of the boundary for both the user and other family members? .e.g. if someone uses outside the home, family members may be at less risk from paraphernalia, but will the user be at more risk?
- **Set clear consequences** for what will happen if the boundary is broken. Consequences need to be appropriate and can be graded from mild to severe. Consequences need to feel manageable so you will be able to carry them out if the boundary is broken. Consequences need to be something you will do, not something the user will do - as you cannot make them do it.
- How will you **measure** if the boundary has been kept?
- **How long** is the boundary to be held for?
- When will the boundary be **reviewed**?
- Is there **flexibility for changes** in circumstances?
- **When and where** will the boundary be set?

- It is important to **get agreement with other family members** to prevent 'divide and rule' by the user. Who else is affected and involved? Are other family members in agreement about the boundary?
- **Is the boundary realistic** at the moment?
- Can the boundary be set so that **both the user and other family members get some of what they want**? This is more likely to succeed than imposing a boundary or setting one that is about punishing the user because of your anger or frustration.
- Do you need to set a **deadline** or can the boundary be set immediately?
- **Do you have enough support**, both from within yourself and from others, to be able to set and then keep this boundary? What will I do with the difficult and painful feelings that might arise?
- In practice the choice of boundary is often a **compromise rather than the ideal** you may want
- **Is it appropriate to reward the user** if they keep the boundary? In the longer term the user needs to learn that we all need to sometimes compromise what we want for the sake of others and don't get an obvious pay-off for that.
- **Prepare for the likely response the user will have** to the boundary being set. It might help to imagine their reaction to you setting a boundary and any subsequent conversation you might have. Plan ways to counter what they might say. Prepare how to cope with possible manipulation.
- Tell yourself that **your needs are equal to those of others**, that your needs are worth respecting and that you are entitled to set and keep boundaries?

Take your time and get it right. Remember that you can't change someone else. What you can do is change your response to them. This change may in turn invite a change from them.

Setting a boundary

Having defined the boundary the next step is to set it with the substance user. Ideally this is done through negotiation, so the boundary is agreed by all concerned. For negotiation to succeed it is necessary to build and maintain a dialogue between the user and other family members.

Points for developing an effective dialogue (not two people both having a monologue at each other!)

- **Listening** to each other.
- Being **open and honest** with how you are.
- **Respecting the other person**, which is not saying that you like and respect all of their behaviour. We are all different and we are all equal
- **Accepting and understanding the other person's point of view**, even when you don't agree. Sometimes two people can experience the same thing differently
- **Start what you say with 'I...'** so you own what you say

- **Taking responsibility for your part** of what has happened.
- **Not taking responsibility for others** behaviour and their choices.
- **Acknowledging how you feel**, acknowledging how the other person feels.
- **Appropriately expressing feelings**, such as saying you feel angry rather than being angrily abusive.
- Recognising the need for all to exercise **both rights and responsibilities**.
- **Collaboration** rather than confrontation.
- **Stay in this role** even when the user doesn't. You will be inviting them to respond this way.

Effective dialogue builds trust, which can lead people to take more risks with being open, honest and taking responsibility.

Effective dialogue is developing an Adult to Adult relationship and avoids Parent to Child or Child to Child relationships.

Developing effective negotiation skills

- **Asking for what you want**, not demanding or avoiding asking.
- **Checking with the other person** what their response is to what you ask for and what you say, so not making assumptions.
- **Starting easy and if needs be finishing strong**. Begin with negotiation then move onto imposition only if necessary.
- **Collaborating**, being flexible and being willing to compromise to reach an agreement. This will help everyone to save face and believe they have got something. This is the idea of 'win-win' (as opposed to 'win-loose', 'loose-win' or 'loose-loose').
- **Holding out for what is most important** and be willing to compromise on lesser things.
- Agreeing the terms of the boundary, such as when it will start, when you will talk about it again, the consequences of the boundary being broken. Perhaps **ask the substance user what consequence they believe is appropriate?**
- **Making a clear agreement.**

When dialogue and negotiation doesn't work

Then perhaps the first boundary to ask for is for there to be dialogue and negotiation? A boundary can be imposed, without negotiation if that has failed. Imposing can be done verbally and by letter. For example:

'I notice that whenever I try to discuss your drug use in the house that you seem unwilling to talk about it. When you do this I feel angry and frustrated with your behaviour. I ask again that you don't use drugs in our home. This is because I am breaking the law by knowing it happens and not reporting you to the Police. I believe it is also a risk to the health and the safety of us all. If you choose to continue to use drugs in our home and not discuss this I will assume that you have withdrawn your

co-operation. I will then withdraw my co-operation by not buying food and preparing meals for you. I regret it has come to this and I would prefer that we talk about your drug use and its impact upon the rest of the family. I want to end by saying that I still love and want to know you.'

Note the following about the letter:

- It talks about the person's behaviour not them as a person.
- It gives the impact of the boundary being broken.
- It asks for the boundary to be respected; it does not demand it nor avoids it.
- It is honest, open and direct.
- It is balanced between saying what is difficult and what is liked about the person.
- It sets out clearly what the boundary is and the consequences of breaking it.
- **It gives the substance user responsibility for their behaviour and the choice they make.**

Communicating this way has two benefits: You get to say what is important to you and you say it in a way that is easier for the other person to hear.

Keeping a boundary

The last stage is keeping a boundary. This is done by...

- **Noticing** if the boundary is being kept.
- **Acknowledging** when the boundary is kept or if it is broken.
- **Responding** if it is broken by choosing how to react.

If a boundary is broken

Boundaries are often broken by substance users especially when they are first put in place. They often react to changes in family members by pushing them to return to their previous ways of behaving. They are often unwilling to change themselves too. Lastly, substance users often hope the family member will feel unable to enforce a boundary, often based upon their previous experience of them giving way.

If a boundary is broken you need to respond appropriately and assertively.

How to respond appropriately and assertively if a boundary is broken

The first step is to acknowledge to yourself that it has happened and then consider your response. Take your time to choose your response rather than reacting from your feelings of frustration and anger.

Possible responses could include...

- **Saying that the agreed boundary has been broken.**
- **Saying how you feel.**
- **Saying an 'Action – Response – Outcome' statement.** This sounds complicated, but with practice becomes straightforward. There are three parts: Firstly say what behaviour it is that is unreasonable to you (it is important that the Action part describes just their behaviour and not them as a person). Secondly, say how you feel in response to their behaviour (it is important your reaction is not blaming). Lastly, say what you want or restate the boundary. For example 'When you break our agreement not to use drugs in our home I feel so angry and exasperated with your behaviour. I ask again that you honour what we agreed'.
- **Re-negotiating the boundary**, which may include restating what you want and need. This is an opportunity for learning for next time.
- **Implementing the consequence** for the boundary being broken.
- **Being a 'broken record'** and keep repeating what you want and not letting yourself be deflected away from what you want.
- **Commenting on the user's behaviour and how that is different from what they say they'll do.** For example 'I notice that every time this happens you say sorry and then carry on as if we hadn't agreed otherwise'.
- **Asking for things to be put right, to be paid for, for an apology** (but see below).
- **Being consistent.**

Things to remember and consider before responding...

- It may feel difficult to say the above, as with any skill it needs to be developed.
- Prepare how to be assertive when you talk to the user. For example, begin what you say with 'I...', hold eye contact, sit or stand straight, avoid pointing or jabbing your finger, speak firmly without shouting, etc.
- Consider how the user may manipulate your feelings and prepare how you will cope with this. You may well want to seek the support of others at such difficult times to help you help yourself.
- Remember you are not powerless, nor are you all powerful and able to make someone do something. You do have influence, you can ask for what you want and you can invite someone else to do something.

Is sorry enough?

There is no right or wrong answer to this, what matters is that you choose each time whether this is enough for you.

People can say sorry to express their genuine regret for how they have behaved and show us their remorse. Or, to invite us to feel sorry for them, to invite us to believe they respect us when they may not!

Consider both what the user says and how they say it. Consider too if the user is whole-heartedly sorry, or whether a part of them is and another part of them isn't.

Remember 'actions speak louder than words'.

Seeking support

Setting boundaries and changing your relationship with a user for most people is difficult. It can be especially hard if you feel isolated and unsupported. It can be beneficial to find individuals or organisations that will support and help you as you try to address the conflict that may be happening in your relationships. You can search for local services which support families affected by substance use on the Adfam website www.adfam.org.uk. It also has a list of national support and information agencies which may be able to help you with the specific problems you face