

Leadership and Care

1. Clarifying responsibilities in our minds

The adults make it clear who has the responsibility for solving a problem. The teacher or parent decides whether the line is firmly drawn to prohibit certain things or there is opportunity for discussion about alternative ways to meet our community's desired goals.

NON-NEGOTIABLE RULES clarify that the adult is firmly taking responsibility to forbid a certain action. The responsible adult acts with authority to block prohibited, dangerous or excluded actions. Non-negotiable rules are usually stated as prohibitions, like these:

- No hurting or endangering anyone.*
- No destruction (usually non-disposable materials and equipment).*
- No put downs (critical or degrading remarks about others).*
- No out of bounds (specified limited areas).*

NEGOTIABLE RULES set the guides or ideals to achieve and share the responsibility with children. Adults play a role in helping members of the community think about and solve the problems the community faces. The goal is to help children take responsibility for how they act without the adult having to always intercede. Negotiable rules have boundaries that are flexible and modifiable, to be created by a discussion among the parties involved. The adult, of course, is one of those parties. Negotiable rules are goals for harmonious community interactions. Negotiable rules are phrased as the ideals we are striving for, like these:

- We use words to solve problems.*
- We care for others' work, body, and space.*
- We open to all the right to be included.*

You, of course, may add other **non-negotiable** and **negotiable** rules to convey the expectations, as you see them, in different contexts and different stages of development. When a rule is non-negotiable you have placed it in your responsibility basket and you, therefore, have to be ever on the watch to enforce it. When a rule is negotiable, the children have primary responsibility; they help each other fix their mistakes, which are supposed to occur in order for the children to learn to manage them. Mistakes are opportunities for community development, in which the adult is there to assist.

2. Opening dialogue about responsibilities

The situation and age can determine whether a rule is non-negotiable or negotiable. For example: the expectations for how a child eats in a campground are different than in a restaurant. Also, the expectations for eating behavior are different for a 3-year-old and a 13-year-old.

- **non-negotiable** — *Everyone must be seated while eating. No walking around with food.* (The adult will act quickly to stop all mistakes.)
- **negotiable** — *We want calm and togetherness while eating. How can we do that and still have a good time?.* (The children will help find a way to act that allows them freedom and cares for their safety or courtesy.)

As children grow we offer more negotiable opportunities to have a voice in what is decided, so they learn to take more responsibility. The challenge is to phrase rules and responsibilities in the way that is explicit, clearly "adult-responsible" or clearly "community-responsible" so the children understand. We do this by stating the goal we share and then inviting ways to accomplish that. In the end we are looking for agreement from everyone.

3. Acting assertively when confronting a problem

Children explore the realms of their personal power, push back at being controlled, or make mistakes. Leaders don't prevent mistakes, leaders enable others to learn from making them. Our job is to facilitate that learning.

First adults have to make a split-second decision: does this problem violate a NON-NEGOTIABLE rule?

YES ⇒ It is your responsibility. Act assertively. These are options:

- a) State the fact that this action will not be tolerated: "**I cannot allow you to...**" and physically prevent it from occurring.
- b) Or issue a Reprimand for a serious mistake, if this is the first time it has happened
- c) Go to technique 3 or 4 under *Communicating Limits* below
- d) Begin a management program for difficult behavior

NO ⇒ This means the child has a role in solving this problem.

Pausing for a while may allow the children to begin to solve it. Look for emerging positive action and support it with descriptions, narrations and non-verbal positive expression. State the negotiable rule as a goal, e.g., **“The goal is to use words to solve problems.”** Your role is one of offering your attention and interest while helping the children find a way to meet the goal in a way that is agreeable to all. You can sequence your levels of help using the convention for Communicating Limits.

4. Offering information towards taking responsibility

Communicating Limits Convention

1. **GIVE INFORMATION** Offer facts, (not emotions) about what you see with your own eyes or hear with your own ears right now, then wait for the child to rectify the problem. *“The water is running onto the floor.”*
2. **PREDICT THE NATURAL CONSEQUENCES** Outline the likely results if the current behavior continues: *“Someone may hurry by and slip.”* Then wait again.
3. **OFFER AN EQUAL CHOICE** Offer two or more ways for the child to rectify the problem or accomplish what the child(ren) would like in appropriate ways you could agree to: *“You may use the towels, or you may post a sign over the wet spot for now. You can choose.”*
4. **DRAW A LINE** *“We have to address this problem before we can continue.” “After you take care of the water spill, you can continue to play.”*

5. Listening actively in response to deep emotions

At times children may be so emotionally involved that it is difficult to reach them. They may be angry, tearful, or sullen and therefore unable to participate in finding an appropriate solution to a problem. In these cases, active listening comes first. The purpose of active listening is to really **listen** to the child, non-judgmentally, and provide ways for the child to come to understand and express emotions appropriately.

Emotions belong to the child. They are not to be removed, discounted, or denied. If they are faced as indicators of an underlying discontent, we can help the child reflect upon it and move beyond if we really hear them and acknowledge their point of view. The child needs someone who is understanding and accepting, with unconditional positive regard.

The first step is to say to oneself, *“This is an opportunity for closeness.”* Emotions are not evil; they are what make us human and draw us closer together. The intent of a caring facilitator is to act in a way that allows the child to voluntarily express the problem and come to understand it.

It helps if the facilitator keeps from talking about the emotion at first. By holding words of emotion in abeyance until the child’s experience is fully understood, then a more precise vocabulary can be offered.

These are the guides for a convention for opening that dialog.

1. **DESCRIBE WHAT YOU PHYSICALLY SEE** Your eyes and ears are taking in data about the child. In factual, non-judging ways you can describe that in a simple concise statement. *“You are lying on the floor.”* Avoid using any feeling words because those are inferences you are projecting and may or may not be accurate.
2. **PARAPHRASE THE CHILD’S MESSAGE** The child is saying something with his or her words or actions. Convey in your own language what the child is saying. The challenge is to not use any of the words the child uses, but say the same thing as accurately as you can.

Example: Child: *“He pushed me!”* Adult: *“You got shoved, huh?”*

The child can correct any misinterpretation of your thinking. This is not the time to guess at emotions, because we often see only the tip of the iceberg in others. The challenge is to illuminate the source of the problem the child is having which usually is difficult to convey. It helps, ideally, if you can avoid emotional vocabulary and state these paraphrases positively.

Example: Child: *“Get out of here!”* Not so good: *“You don’t like him.”* Better: *“You want him away from you.”*

By continuing with paraphrases and parallel talk about yourself and your own experiences, you gradually uncover the dimensions of the child’s perception. Only after it is fully clear, do you proceed to the next step.

3. **OFFER NAMES FOR THE EMOTIONS** After the child’s expression is uncovered, you can offer the complex language names we have for emotions. The goal is to expand a vocabulary of feelings by using new vocabulary to represent the emotional experience the child is in. Since one can never be exactly sure how another person feels, we offer the names as

conjectures: *"I would be feeling pretty disappointed."* If you avoid using the words angry, mad, and sad, you are forced to search for just the right word. Angry, mad and sad words imply the right to have tantrums, strike out and cry, which are the natural, physical actions accompanying those emotions. If we offer more complex vocabulary, such as, discouraged, helpless, rejected, impatient, threatened, worried, embarrassed, deceived, frustrated, abandoned, lonely, confused, lost, pensive, defeated, disappointed, neglected, exasperated, resentful, etc., no clear action is implied. These words are how we convey understanding and acceptance of the human emotional experience. With words that work, we can move beyond dominance of emotions into taking action.

4. **PRESENT THE CURRENT SITUATION** Now that the message is shared and the emotion described, it is time to move on and rejoin the world. By simply describing the situation facing the child right now, e.g., how much time there is, what is available to choose from, etc., you offer the child the opportunity to make a choice that he or she thinks best.

6. Leading negotiation so children solve their own disputes

Often a problem is a dispute between children that essential does not involve us, so negotiation between the children is required. Our role is to give them the responsibility, the time necessary, and our trust in their competence. In negotiation the parties involved put their heads together to solve the problem. Young children can develop life-long skills if they are given the responsibility for developing the alternatives, selecting a possible solution to try, and being allowed to see if their solutions work. Taking the time to face these personally significant conflicts and work them through allows children to learn the social skills to face further conflicts inevitable in adult life.

Choice One: the adult can simply remove the opportunity to use the disputed object or participate in the opportunity until the children present a solution. It may take some time for children to figure it out, but when they do they are more powerful and competent. They become closer to each other, too.

Choice Two: the adult may offer "good offices" to structure the conversation. There are four items on the agenda for discussion. The adult, as chairman of the group with a problem, controls the topic to be addressed. One simply states what we are talking about and waits. You lead by being willing to invest the time right now and being determined not let anything else happen until each step is met.

1. **THE PROBLEM MUST BE CLEAR**

The first task is for the children identify their problem. *"First we need to state the problem clearly."*

2. **THE CHILDREN OFFER IDEAS**

The children contribute ideas for solving the problem. *"We need some ideas here."* *"We need a solution to this."* *"What could we do?"* One may add alternatives if needed or contribute ideas from your own experience. Even outlandish ones spawn others: *"I know of children who have..."* Restate any negative statements, appearing as "not's," in a positive way. Example: *"He shouldn't take things anyway."* *"What might he do?"* *"He could leave me alone."*

3. **THE CHILDREN DECIDE WHAT TO DO**

Guide them in deciding way they prefer and help them carry it out. If their solution doesn't work, they will discover it soon enough.

4. **REFLECT ON THE PROCESS**

Learning to negotiate is a life-long process. Adults still have to learn to do this. Any progress young children make towards this end is a major accomplishment. Let them know that by saying when the problem is solved—*"You did it."* *"You found a clever way."* *"You people are sure growing up."*

Reprimand

When a child makes a serious mistake for the first time:

1. **GET CLOSE AND STATE THE ACTION EXACTLY**

2. **DESCRIBE THE CONSEQUENCES**

- a) for others around the child
- b) for the child
- c) for you, yourself

3. **PAUSE**

4. **CONVEY HOW MUCH THE CHILD IS VALUED, RESPECTED AND LOVED**

Aaron knocked over Sara's block tower. This is the first time you have see him do this kind of thing. You go to Sara, following the guide to attend to the victim first: *"Sara, you could tell him not to do that. I was working here, making something I cared about. I wasn't finished."*

To Aaron you could issue a reprimand:

1. *(Get close.) You knocked it down without asking her.*
2. *a) Kids avoid other kids who destroy their stuff. It makes it difficult to create clever things.
b) You will end up playing by yourself more, which isn't as much fun.
c) I will have to watch you more carefully. I end up with more problems in my classroom.*
3. *(Pause, looking serious, but not angry.)*
4. *I like having you in this class. I love you.*

There is no need, at number 4, to remind the child about the mistake. The child knows and you have said it at number 1. Leaving the child with a positive, authentic statement expresses your unconditional positive regard and trust that he or she can correct their own mistakes.

Usually one delivers only one reprimand for a particular behavior. It is an attempt to make it very clear, in a warm accepting manner, that this behavior is not acceptable. If it continues, it means the child chooses to continue it despite that communication. More communication is attending to inappropriate behavior. Other strategies are needed.