

Setting and Keeping Boundaries

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What are boundaries?

One definition of 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 drug or alcohol users can set boundaries to limit the impact of a substance user's behaviour. Effective boundaries can assert the needs or rights of families so they feel more 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 families 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 they 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 redefining, resetting, 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 parents 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.

Defining a boundary

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

- **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 doesn't use substances?** Ask yourself if it is necessary to treat the user differently, just because they happen to use drugs/alcohol
- **Define the boundary in terms of 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 the 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're 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 like needles, but will the user be at increased 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.
- How will you **measure** if the boundary has been kept?
- **How long** is the boundary to be held for? Do you need to set a **deadline**?
- When will the boundary be **reviewed**?
- Is there **flexibility for change** in circumstances?
- **When and where** will the boundary be set?
- It's 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 that is about punishing the user because of your anger.
- In practice, the choice of boundary is often a **compromise** rather than the ideal you might want
- Is it appropriate to **reward** the user if they keep the boundary?

- Prepare for the **response of the user**. Prepare yourself for how they might react, and the conversations you might have
- 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. 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 and effective dialogue – not two people having a monologue at each other!

- **Listening** to each other
- Being **open and honest** about how you feel
- **Respecting** the other person; **accepting and understanding** another person's point of view, even when you don't agree
- Starting what you say with '**I**' so you own your statements
- **Taking responsibility for your part** of what has happened
- **Not taking responsibility for others' behaviour** and their choices
- **Acknowledging how you feel** and how the other person feels
- **Expressing feelings appropriately**, like saying you feel angry rather than being angrily abusive
- **Collaboration** rather than confrontation

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-child or child-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 not making assumptions
- **Starting easy** and, if needs be, **finishing strong**. Begin with negotiation and only move onto imposition if necessary.
- **Collaborating**, being flexible and being willing to compromise to reach an agreement. This will help everyone to save face and feel they have gained something. Looking for 'win-win' scenarios
- **Holding out for what is most important** and being 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, and the consequences of it being broken.
- **Making a clear agreement.**

When dialogue and negotiation doesn't work

In this situation, perhaps the first boundary to ask for is for there to be dialogue and negotiation. A boundary can be imposed without negotiation if this has failed completely. Imposing a boundary can be done verbally or in writing, for example:

'I notice that whenever I try to discuss your drug use in the house, 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 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 cooperation. I will then withdraw my cooperation 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 on 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 or avoid the question
- It is **open, honest 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 choices they make.

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 drug and alcohol 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 – a feeling often based on previous experience of families 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 this has happened and then consider your response. Be realistic about what has happened and don't make excuses for people. Take 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 clearly how you feel**
- Giving an **action-response-outcome** statement, e.g. 'when you break our agreement not to use drugs in our home, I feel very angry with your behaviour. I therefore ask again that you honour what we agreed.'
- **Renegotiating the boundary**, which may include restating what you want and need. This is an opportunity for learning for next time.
- **Implementing the consequence** of the boundary being broken
- **Being a 'broken record'** and repeating what you want, and not letting yourself be deflected away from this
- **Commenting on the user's behaviour, and how it is different from what they say they'll do** e.g. 'I notice that every time happens, you say sorry and then carry on as if we hadn't agreed otherwise'
- **Being consistent**

And some things to remember and consider before responding:

- If 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 e.g. hold eye contact, sit or stand straight, avoid pointing, speak firmly, etc.
- Consider how the user may manipulate your feelings and prepare how much you will cope with this. You may want to seek the support of others at such difficult times to help you help yourself – details of local groups can be found at www.adfam.org.uk
- Remember you are not powerless, but nor are you all-powerful and able to make someone do something they don't want to. 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. But they can also say sorry to invite us to feel sorry for them, or 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 wholeheartedly 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 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.