Setting Clear Boundaries for the New School Year!

When I first started my teaching career, I remember hearing about a study that was done to show how children are affected by boundaries. In the study, the children were observed at a school with a nearby playground, where there were no fences or marks outlining the boundaries where it was safe to play. The children were not given any instructions or limits regarding where they could play. Later in the same setting, a fence was put up. The children clearly understood where the safe boundaries were, and they were invited to play anywhere within the fenced-in area. Interestingly, the children who were given clear boundaries tended to explore more, and felt more comfortable using the whole area where it was safe to play. In the first scenario, children who were not given a clear sense of the boundaries tended to stay close to the school building without wandering too far from it.

It is perhaps necessary to re-define our understanding of boundaries in order for them to become effective tools in education. The word "boundaries" may sound like a negative, limiting term, but when used correctly, they can create opportunities for growth that would not be present otherwise. If we think of boundaries as an aid for nurturing independence, creativity, and a sense of freedom, it is easy to see whether the boundaries we set are working or not. We can observe to see if children manifest these qualities, as this should be the intended result! As in the example above, children who don't have a clear sense of boundaries may stay so close to the "safe" area that they consequently miss out on the beauty of the surrounding environment. A lack of appropriate boundaries may also create chaos, confusion, and unhappiness in a home or classroom where no one knows what the limits are. Education is really about creating the right environment for inherent talents and capacities to grow and flourish. If the environment is not clearly defined, and the rules and limits are not openly explained and modeled by the adults, this has an adverse effect on children's natural tendencies for exploration, communication, and independence – all of which depend on working within clear boundaries.

In *The Family Virtues Guide*, setting clear boundaries is described as one of the 5 Strategies of The Virtues Project™. In this context, virtues-based boundaries are described as key elements of building successful relationships at home and at school. Virtues-based boundaries are those that respect each individual's rights and responsibilities, and use the virtues as a guide for creating a safe and nurturing environment for learning. The natural result of using virtues-based boundaries is manifested in a sense of calm, peacefulness, and unity among the people involved.

The start of a new school year is a great time to establish new rules and boundaries that can benefit the whole family and school community. Here are some things to keep in mind when setting effective boundaries (both at home and at school!):

1. Be moderate – Successful boundaries don't have to be an elaborate set of rules or regulations. They should be worded in positive and virtues-based language rather than a list of do's and don'ts. Also, a general statement that can apply to a variety of settings and situations is usually more effective as it does not limit the child

and encourages independent thinking. A simple example may be "Tell the truth" or "Respect each other's space/room"

2. Set educative consequences – When a boundary is broken, it should have a clearly understood/explained consequence that all parties are agreed upon. If a clear boundary within the home is to "Tell the truth" but a window is broken without explanation, the consequence may be that outdoor games will have to be suspended for a week. It should be clearly explained that the consequence is because of the lack of truthfulness, not because the window is broken! Accidents will always happen, so we need to create boundaries around the virtues that we want our children to develop rather than punish them for acts that are often unintentional.

3. Be firm in your resolution – As described above, the purpose of creating boundaries is to create a safe environment. Boundaries should be like the walls of a house that protect us from harm. If the walls are constantly moving, shifting, and even disappearing, we are definitely not in a safe place. On the contrary, this creates a dangerous and frightening environment. We can take the time to consult with others so that the boundaries we create are based on the principles of justice, and then… stick to them!

4. Start with yourself – Create boundaries for your own self as a parent and educator. What do you need to feel safe, peaceful and joyful? What gives you energy? What drains you? Allocate time to activities that re-energize and uplift you. When your life is in order and you respect the boundaries you have set for yourself, you are much better equipped to creatively respond to your children's needs for order and boundaries in their lives.

Here's to a new school year of creating successful boundaries!

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