

Emotional Boundaries

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Within the realm of human interactions, the concept of setting boundaries is nothing new. But typically, the first thought that comes to mind tends to involve physical boundaries. And while topics such as “personal space” and “appropriate touch” are certainly relevant to safe environments, they might overshadow other important boundaries.

Behavioral disciplines recognize that emotional boundaries in relationships have a significant impact upon personal development in both young people and adults. In fact, these emotional boundaries are so common compared to physical boundaries that they can be discussed using terms that we do not relate to boundaries at all. For example, where exactly does the difference lie between a friend or a beloved, parents or siblings, colleagues or supervisors, children or adults? We have distinct comfort zones for each of our relationships, and if that relationship changes, so does the emotional boundary. Often it is not even a conscious decision. For example, two people working on a similar project can progress from sharing a common interest to legitimate friendship very quickly.

However, when it comes to our emotional boundaries around children, we as responsible adults have to exercise extra caution as we relate to minors. The seemingly obvious reason for this is that we are morally charged with guiding their development. And, as with any other responsible position, the options for relationships have to be limited.

We routinely do this in adult relationships as well, so applying the same guidelines to children should not be a stretch by any means. The most common example would include the countless “non-fraternization” clauses in many professional work environments. And whether someone is being paid to fulfill their obligations with children or is volunteering their time to work with the kids, the same professional boundaries exist.

Now, in no way is this article meant to insinuate that our relationships with children must maintain a cold, professional demeanor. All of us can appreciate the professionals we have interacted with who had the ability to make us feel at ease, or at least comfortable within the scope of the relationship. We are of course talking about doctors with good bedside manner, clerks who are pleasantly helpful, pastors who are genuinely pastoral, and so on. Respectful and kind behavior like this can certainly lend itself to our relationships with children. But just as in those examples, the professional boundary must remain.

In some safe environments programs, the adage is often used that there is a BIG difference between being friendly and being friends. Even in a broad definition, the emotional boundary of friendship allows for more, sometimes much more, personal disclosure and familiarity between individuals. Moreover, one of the more satisfying aspects of genuine friendship is that it is, relationally speaking, self-propagating. That is, the closer two individuals become, the more they enjoy being around each other, leading to them growing even closer, and so on. In the appropriate context, this dynamic works so well that many of us eventually encounter a friendship that blossoms into a lifelong vocation of marriage—but it started as friendship.

This is why it is so important to maintain a professional emotional boundary. Children, even teenagers, have not reached a level of maturity that provides the skills and knowledge needed to set appropriate boundaries every time. That is one of the reasons adult guidance is so critical to their successful development. So, whatever the relationship is with the child, be it parent/child, teacher/student, pastor/parishioner, coach/athlete, counselor/client—helpful is fine. Friendly is fine. “Friends” can be problematic. Keep the boundaries professional and appropriate to the relationship.

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