

"I knew that coming to art group would mean a lot to the kids, but I just didn't realize how much!" – New DrawBridge Volunteer

Limit Setting and Boundaries

What Are Boundaries and Why Are They Important at DrawBridge?

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules or limits that each of us creates to identify what are reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to behave around us and how we will respond when someone steps outside those limits. Personal boundaries define you as an individual. They are statements of what you will or won't do, what you like and don't like, and of how close someone can get to you.

Boundaries are an essential part of life, and children particularly need adults in their lives to set healthy boundaries. Boundaries help children feel safe, and are necessary for their healthy development.

The children we work with at DrawBridge may not have grown up in an environment where healthy boundaries exist. The adults in their lives may not model healthy boundaries and in some cases a child's boundaries may have been violated by physical or sexual abuse. Many of these children have not had the opportunity to develop their own sense of healthy and strong personal and/or physical boundaries.

Boundaries are communicated both verbally and non-verbally through body language. The manner in which we maintain and enforce our own boundaries during the art group sets an example for children. When we interact with children, many situations occur that are opportunities for modeling healthy boundaries. These include setting limits on behavior such as asking a child to remain seated or to speak with respect. They also include situations that are more subtle and require you to set your own boundaries with children, such as how to respond when a child asks you a question you are not comfortable answering or when a child's behavior seems overly affectionate.

Limit Setting in the Art Group:

There are many situations that may come up in the art groups when it will be necessary to set a limit for a child. Sometimes there is confusion that non-judgmental acceptance means not setting limits. In fact, limit setting can be a profound act of love. By providing a clearly delineated set of expectations (which the child can help define) the child can relax into structure. It also communicates

that you are establishing a safe space for that child. It can be a challenge to feel comfortable saying “no” to children. Developing a clear and conscious understanding of what behaviors you feel comfortable with will help you to say “no” in a kind, consistent, and clear manner. Effective limit setting begins with understanding our own relationship to it. Some helpful questions to ask yourself are:

- What was your family’s approach to limit setting? Did your family tend to say “yes” or “no” more often?
- Can you remember a time when you appreciated having a limit set? When a limit was too rigid?

Common Scenarios in the Art Groups:

It is often helpful for new volunteers to run through or observe examples of situations that occur in art groups and how appropriate and compassionate boundaries can be set.

Physical Boundaries: Children have a natural propensity for physical closeness with the adults with whom they feel safe. While this is normal for their development, we must keep in mind that they may have been touched in an unhealthy way at some point. By demonstrating your boundaries around physical touch they will learn that it's healthy to tell another person that they don't feel like being touched. If a child is overly physical and seems to have unhealthy boundaries around touch, they may have been physically abused and this should be discussed with your Art Group Facilitator.

Scenario: A child asks to sit in your lap or starts touching you and putting their arms around you without stopping. You begin to feel overwhelmed, but think it might be nice to have this child sit in your lap.

What to do:

- Pause and decide what your personal comfort level is around the child touching you
- Acknowledge their desire to sit on your lap
- State your preference
- Suggest an activity involving art that can serve a similar purpose so they know you care and would like to connect with them

It may look something like:

- Child: "Can I sit in your lap?"
- Volunteer: (First ask yourself: would this make me feel comfortable right now?) "I understand that you would like to sit in my lap (acknowledge their

desire/help them feel heard), but I am not in the mood right now. How about we draw you sitting on someone's lap?"

Please take a look at a common group scenario role played by DrawBridge staff:



[Role Play Video 1](#)

General Guidelines Around Boundary Setting:

- Get on the same level as the children when you work with them (see them eye to eye).
- Reflect back and acknowledge what a child wants (a piggy back ride, your jewelry etc.)
- Talk about it, write about it or tell a story about it. Validate the child's experience but maintain a boundary.
- Touching a child is only OK if you ask for permission.
- Sit with a child and engage with them authentically by being present.
- It's important that your tone of voice doesn't belittle the child.
- If a child does something that makes you feel uncomfortable, check in with yourself – is my reaction coming from being needy, fearful or wanting to make a connection?
- Then set a boundary that works for you and the child without making either of you uncomfortable.

Please take a look another common group scenario role played by DrawBridge staff:



[Role Play Video 2](#)

Reflection: Think of a situation that occurred in the last week when you felt you

could have done a better job at holding your boundary with another person.

Examples: You initially said no to someone's request and then backed down when that person persisted, and you said yes when you really felt like saying no, or you felt someone disrespected you and you did nothing about it.

How could you have set a boundary that would have made you more comfortable?

Collaborating With the Art Group Facilitator:

Your Art Group Facilitator is your mentor and guide. Please come to him or her with questions about the art group structure and guidelines. The art group is not a classroom setting where children have to follow rules at all times. It is the Facilitator's role to develop an atmosphere where children feel encouraged to create and free to express themselves while maintaining everyone's safety. This may sometimes seem like things are out of control or too loud. Please talk to your Facilitator about these boundaries to make sure you understand them, especially if they make you feel uncomfortable.