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From the Womb to the World (setting limits)

Parents will spend anywhere from eighteen to twenty-some years preparing their children for the world. This process is a very demanding and complicated one. The first goal is to ensure the child's safety. The second goal is to support the child through developmental stages while providing proper health care and educational opportunities.

Nature provides a womb where an unborn child can grow and develop in a safe and secure environment. When the child outgrows that environment it is "expelled" into a larger world. Hopefully the child is then provided with a parent's loving arms where it can be nourished, nurtured and protected. When the parent can no longer "hold" the child, it may be placed in a crib. This might be seen as "protective custody" but from the child's point of view, it functions as a jail cell. The crib even has bars. The child may peer out from behind these bars at the larger world and cry to be set free. The loving parent knows, however, that there are too many dangers for an unsupervised child. The child is held in the crib's "protective custody" until parents can provide the needed supervision.

When the child is older, he may be placed in playpen in the living room. This is just a slightly larger "cell". As the child grows older, he or she may be given the run of the living room, but not until the room has been cleared of sharp, breakable or otherwise dangerous objects. The parent may even place plastic covers over the wall outlets to prevent the child from inserting objects in them. (When I was a child, this was not done. I once inserted a copper penny into an electrical outlet. I was certain that I'd discovered where the bogeyman lived!)

Providing "limits" for the child is essential. A child with no limits could crawl out in front of a bus or otherwise cause himself injury. Eventually, the child is old enough to ask to go outside to play. If there is a fenced yard with a secure gate, this may be no problem. However, if the yard has no secure fence more caution is required. Perhaps the parent consents to allow the child out if he agrees to remain in the yard. Typically the child agrees and is allowed outside under that condition. The alert parent will, however, station herself or himself at the front window to observe. This may be the first time that the child has had *abstract* limits to deal with. Prior to now, the limits were *concrete*. The parent's arms, the bars of the crib, the sides of the playpen and the living room walls were all concrete limits. The child tested those limits then and there is no reason to believe that he will not test these newer abstract limits as well. (Even in the womb the child tested limits as any pregnant mother can attest.)

Thus, the alert parent standing at the front window may see her child wander out of the yard in pursuit of a shiny object or a friendly looking dog or a ball that got away. At that point, the parent will open the door and call the child inside. The child may protest and insist he will not leave the yard again. The parent can gently insist the child come in because, “You failed to keep our agreement and if I can’t trust you to keep our agreement then I don’t feel safe with you being outside. You are much too precious to me to be allowed outside without limits. You may have another chance to-morrow (or whenever).” The next time the child asks to go outside, the parent may reiterate the agreement. “You may go outside if you promise to stay in the front yard.” At this point it wouldn’t hurt to point out that the yard stops where the grass stops and the sidewalk or the driveway starts. It is always a good idea to ask the child to repeat the agreement to ensure understanding and to reinforce the agreement. When the child is allowed outside, the alert parent may again stand by the front window and observe. There is a pretty good chance that the child will again become distracted by something outside of the yard and wander out. That is when the parent again goes to the front door and calls the crestfallen child back inside. This reinforcement of the limits is what eventually convinces the child that their life is actually improved by keeping agreements. If violation of those limits is not observed and consequences offered (with love and respect) then the child does not learn that life is better when agreements are kept.

These agreements and reasonable consequences are actually extensions of the parent’s protective arms. Their purpose is to protect the child when the child is out of sight. All failures to keep agreements must be acknowledged. Not acknowledging failed agreements constitutes tacit permission and encourages the child to disregard limits and agreements in the future.

As the child grows and develops and his judgment improves, he can be given a larger and larger “yard” to explore. Eventually he gets the freedom of the block, then the local area, then the community, the city and, eventually, the world. Ideally, by the time the child reaches young adulthood, his judgment has improved to the point that a parent can trust him to travel to other cities and even other countries. Thus, the parent has raised a child that he can then let loose in the world at large. The child is free to explore and find his way and his interests and pursue a life of joy and fulfillment. Certainly mistakes will be made. Mistakes are instructive. That is how we learn. But the mistakes will be relatively minor and are not apt to be crippling. The child that was initially so fragile and uneducated has traded in the small confines of the protective womb for the much more interesting world at large.