

# Building positive, safe relationships with Boundaries

By Dave Batty

How can you have relationships that are healthy, safe and positive?

How many young people end up in trouble because of choosing the wrong friends or giving in to peer pressure?

If you are single and looking for a life partner, how do you know if this person is a great prospect for a safe relationship or a problem trap?

Let me describe two kinds of people and you tell me which one you want to be in relationship with.

**Option #1:** This person demonstrates

Responsibility  
Self-control  
Freedom  
Love

Now consider another person who has the qualities listed below:

**Option #2:** This person is

Irresponsible  
Manipulative  
Controlling of others  
Out of control

“That’s obvious,” you say, “just answer two more questions—Is s/he good looking? and Which one has lots of money.”

What makes the difference between these two people? Boundaries.

The people with option #1 characteristics have learned about boundaries and have made them a big part of their life.

The person with option #2 characteristics is living without those boundaries.

Obviously, one’s understanding of boundaries has nothing to do with physical looks or money.

## What is a boundary?

A young man lost his wife through a tragic car accident. A couple of years later he began to date with the prospect of re-marrying. His relationship with one young lady eventually resulted in marriage. However, because of his previous

marriage and all the appropriate physical expressions of his first marriage relationship, he put in place a personal boundary that he followed all through his courtship as a widower. He chose to have no physical contact—no hugging, no kissing, or any other physical expression of love

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*Boundaries are for my protection. They build trust in relationships when they are honored.*

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until after he was married. It was his way of putting in place a boundary that would keep this new relationship safe. It was also a powerful way to communicate to his new wife-to-be that he had the inner quality of self-control.

A boundary is a property line—it defines who you are.

A boundary is a rule or a standard that you put in place for yourself. Other people can also define boundaries for you. Your response to these rules demonstrates how safe a person you are.

Perhaps you have heard a young single man say about a girl he is dating, “When she says ‘no’ she really means ‘yes.’”

- ❖ **What are boundaries?**
- ❖ **What kinds of boundaries do you need in your life?**
- ❖ **What is your attitude toward boundaries?**
- ❖ **What can you do if you have a loved one with an addiction?**

His interpretation shows he lacks respect for her and he is out of control—an option #2 person living without boundaries.

## 4 Kinds of boundaries

The boundaries that we have in our lives can be categorized as four general types.

**1. Physical boundaries**—what you will touch and who you decide will touch you and how. For example—I will not purchase or look at a pornographic magazine. I will attend church every Sunday. I will not snack on candy between meals.

**2. Mental boundaries**—what you will think about, your opinions. Mental boundaries can provide protection from a variety of temptations and problems. For example—I will not dwell on things that are not true—or stated as a positive boundary—I will only think

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*I am always responsible  
for my feelings,  
behaviors, and attitudes.*

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about things that are true. I will not plan revenge on someone who has mistreated me.

Philippians 4:8 provides a practical list of boundaries regarding our thoughts: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” (NIV)

**3. Emotional boundaries**—I am always responsible for my feelings. When I say, “You make me so angry!” what I really am saying is,

“I am out of control and I am not taking responsibility for my emotions.” Blaming another person for my emotional responses reveals that I am not taking responsibility for my emotional boundaries.

Having a proper understanding of emotional boundaries also goes the other way. I will not take responsibility for someone else’s emotions. When they lay the blame at your feet for their emotional response, you must process their blame with a healthy response. Your proper understanding of boundaries can protect you even if the other person is operating without proper boundaries.

If another person is expressing anger toward you, at that very instant you have a choice to make—what will be your emotional response? You can react with anger, or you can choose to respond within your emotional boundaries—and respond the way God wants you to respond.

**4. Spiritual boundaries**—what is God’s will versus my will. The commands of God in the Bible are one type of spiritual boundaries. The specific call of God on your life is another example of a spiritual boundary.

One of our Teen Challenge graduates came back to speak in a chapel service recently. He shared how God had not allowed him to go back to his old neighborhood for ten years after he first came to Teen Challenge. This spiritual boundary was God’s way of protecting him from danger.

If I understand boundaries the way God wants me to, I will become that person who demonstrates responsibility, self-control, freedom, and love.

Your boundaries have a major influence in your life, and also in the

lives of those around you. First you need to examine this issue in regards to your own behavior. But your responsibilities as a parent and other key relationships also speak to this issue of boundaries. As a parent it is proper to place boundaries on your children—for their protection, and to teach them to be responsible.

A mother came to me with a dilemma—her son in high school started using drugs. She and her husband decided to put 3 rules in

## Boundaries Change

The boundaries we live by need to change as our circumstances change. For example, as a single young adult, it is perfectly appropriate to have a mental boundary where you look at a person and ask yourself, “Is this person someone I might be interested in having as a life partner?”

But if you are already married, then this is an inappropriate thought boundary. As a married person you have already made a lifetime commitment to your spouse, and that puts a new boundary in place when it comes to looking at others around you.

As a married person certain physical expressions of touch are appropriate only with your spouse. To touch others that same way is an inappropriate boundary.

As a married person, I have determined not to have a friendship with another woman unless my wife also has a friendship with that woman.

place for their son—no drugs in the house, go to school or get a job, and third, be home by midnight on school days, and 1 AM on weekends. This son felt the rules were outrageous, and so he left home.

Now two years later he was calling, asking mom if he could come back home. She was so concerned that if she said no, she would be failing to show God's unconditional love to her son.

I asked if her son had agreed to abide by the rules she had put in place for him. She said, no, he had given her his own set of rules. I assured her that saying no to her son would be an act of love.

Parents have a difficult challenge in providing boundaries to their children. But that is part of responsible parenting. Do you want

to have children who are responsible, self-controlled, expressing freedom in a healthy way, and loving in a wholesome way? Then teach them how to develop the right kind of boundaries.

When parents fail to provide proper boundaries for their children, they are allowing this child to grow up and become irresponsible, manipulative, controlling of others, and out of control.

### It's a process

Boundaries provide a place of safety and freedom. But many of us have a big challenge—our past! As we seek to put new boundaries in place in our lives, or in the lives of those around us, it can be a bumpy process.

When you look at the character

traits of the person without boundaries—irresponsible, manipulative, controlling of others, and out of control—it's easy to slide into that lifestyle. To replace these with the positive qualities of being responsible, self-controlled, living in

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*When parents fail to provide proper boundaries for their children, they are setting them up for failure.*

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freedom and love—it's a process.

The staff wanted to dismiss one of our Teen Challenge students because she was caught lying—not once, but many times. She was violating the boundary of “I will tell the truth.” To honor this boundary demonstrates responsibility and self-control.

When I talked with this student, I asked her if lying had been a problem in her life before she came to Teen Challenge. Her response, “I used to lie all the time.” So I asked her, “How much do you lie now?” She replied, “Now I only lie about 10% of the time.”

Now that's great progress! Unless you are the staff that is still living with the consequences and frustrations of the 10%. But it speaks to the reality of process.

If we demand instant perfection in honoring new boundaries—either of ourselves, or others, we may be in for some big disappointments. In your goal to overcome a particular temptation, you may have promised yourself, “I will never do that again, or never think that thought again.” Then only a few days or weeks later,

## Ten Laws of Boundaries your children need to know

1. **The law of sowing and reaping.** What will happen if I do this? Galatians 6:7-8, Galatians 5:22-26, Matthew 25:14-30.
2. **The law of responsibility.** Pulling my own wagon. Galatians 5:13-15, John 15:12, Philippians 2:12-13
3. **The law of power.** I can't do it all, but I'm not helpless, either. Romans 7:15, 19, 23-25, James 4:7-10, Matthew 5:3, 6, 23-24.
4. **The law of respect.** I'm not the only one that matters. James 1:25, 1 Timothy 1:5, Galatians 3:24-25, 2 Corinthians 3:17.
5. **The law of motivation.** Life beyond, “Because I said so.” 1 Timothy 1:5, Galatians 3:24-25, 2 Corinthians 9:7, Ephesians 3:7, Romans 4:15.
6. **The law of evaluation.** Pain can be a gift. Ephesians 4:25-32,

Hebrews 12:11, Proverbs 14:10, James 1:2-4.

7. **The law of proactivity.** Tantrums need not be forever. Romans 7:5, Galatians 5:13, Matthew 5:38-40, Isaiah 7:15, 1 John 2:12-14.
8. **The law of envy.** I am happier if I am thankful. James 4:2, Galatians 6:4, Romans 12:6.
9. **The law of activity.** Jump-starting my engine. Hebrews 10:38-39, Matthew 7:7-8.
10. **The law of exposure.** Honesty is the best policy. Ephesians 4:25-26, Ephesians 5:13-14, Psalm 51:6, John 16:33.

These 10 laws are from the book **Boundaries with Kids**, by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. (Zondervan) See the back of the enclosed response form for information on ordering this book and the companion workbook.

find yourself back in that same place again.

We need to set these boundaries with the understanding that with God's help we will make this a consistent part of our lifestyle, and if and when we fall short, we will get back on track and keep moving ahead.

Do the boundaries I am focusing on represent God's

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### *What boundaries will make me a safe person for others?*

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priorities? Put another way, if God were giving me the top three boundaries He wants me to focus on today, what would He put on that list? If you have children you can ask that same question—what is God's priority for my child today?

You may have the boundary, "I do not want to experience pain." So any time you feel pain, you take a Tylenol or some other pill. So are you medicating the symptom or dealing with the problem? Healthy boundaries will deal with the real issues.

### **What is your attitude toward boundaries?**

Having the right attitude toward the boundaries themselves is one of the keys to our success in becoming a person with healthy boundaries. We need to see these boundaries for what they really are—tools to protect us from danger and destruction. When we consistently apply these boundaries in our lives, we demonstrate we are a safe person.

If we look at these boundaries as restrictions to rob us of freedom,

then we are headed for likely failure. Having the right attitude toward these boundaries is essential if we are to see real growth in our lives.

David in the Old Testament was a man who understood God's boundaries. In Psalm 119 (NIV) he describes his life attitudes toward God's laws.

Vs. 9 How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.

Vs. 10 I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.

Vs. 11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

Vs. 14 I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

Vs. 16 I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

Vs. 20 My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.

Vs. 24 Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors.

Vs. 45 I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.

Vs. 71 It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.

Vs. 72 The law from your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.

Vs. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

Vs. 129 Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.

Vs. 131 I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

When you take the time to read

## **The cost of no boundaries**

When we live outside the boundaries God has given us to follow, we always bring destruction into our lives, and often it spills over and affects others as well.

In the Old Testament, Jonah was told to go and preach in Nineveh. But he ignored God's call—God's boundary for him—and instead got on a ship to go the opposite direction. Because of his disobedience the owners of the ship lost all their cargo in the storm.

If Jonah had honored the boundary God gave him, he would not have been on that ship.

In a greater way, the damage can affect a child who is sexually abused by an adult. What is done by the adult for personal pleasure will cause tremendous damage in the life of that child in the years to come.

The damage this child experiences is often carried into adult life, expressing itself in unforgiveness, shame, distrusting others, fearful of developing close relationships for fear of getting hurt again, and much more. This person often is unable to have a healthy relationship within their own marriage.

the entire Psalm 119, you see the overwhelming message that David loves God's boundaries. His positive attitude toward God's boundaries was an essential key for his life of serving God. In Acts 13:22 God says, "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do every thing I want him to do." (NIV)

Like King David, we can say, "God I want your boundaries in my life." This is the path to real life, real freedom, real self-control, real love.

### So where do I start?

Boundaries affect every area of our lives. So where should you start? I can't answer that for you—then I would be overstepping my boundaries. I truly believe this is a

process that needs to be covered with prayer. Here are some questions that may help you identify key places to start.

What boundaries will make me a safe person for others?

Where am I irresponsible?

What areas of my thought life need improvement? Am I critical of others? What temptations are strong in my life?

What emotional responses do I need to take ownership of?

What areas do I have a hard time submitting to God's will?

What behaviors do I need to change?

Where am I manipulative?

Controlling of others?

What areas of my life are out of control?

If you are at a loss to see practical starting points for developing healthy boundaries, you may want to ask a loved one—husband, wife, or a close friend to give you some feedback. Find someone who will be honest with you.

But you must still take responsibility for these decisions. You may want to write down the boundaries that you want to focus on in the near future. It may be helpful to write them both in positive terms and negative terms—I will not tell a lie, and I will be honest in all my communications, speaking the truth in love.

## Do you have a family member with an addiction?

If you have a loved one with an addiction or a life-controlling problem, they are demonstrating with their out of control behavior that they do not understand boundaries in their own life.

As a parent, spouse, or friend, you have a responsibility to put in place boundaries to protect yourself. These boundaries can also help the other person move toward change and becoming more responsible and self-controlled. You can help "raise the bottom" for your loved one who has a life-controlling problem.

You need to clearly state the consequences that you will enforce if they fail to honor and obey the boundaries you set down for them. For example, you will call the police if they are breaking a law, you will put them out of the house, or you will refuse to give any financial assistance.

These expressions of tough love can be very difficult on you and your loved one with a problem. You must have clear boundaries for yourself, or you will easily give in to their emotionally charged messages to you—"I thought you loved me!" "What kind of a Christian are you to just throw me out of the house?"

One mom had a son using drugs in the house. She put a clear boundary down for her son and said, "If I find drugs in your room, I will call the police and have you arrested." Soon she was put to the test when she found drugs. She called the police. They tried to talk her out of this, telling her, "This will go on your son's record." She stood firm. Since it was his first arrest, he avoided any jail time.

However, a few months later her son decided to join the Coast

Guard. Later that day he called his mom, and angrily accused her, "You are the one who caused me to not get into the Coast Guard, because you had me arrested."

This mom had to focus on her boundary to only receive into her heart what was true. It was not her actions that disqualified him from getting into the Coast Guard. It was his rebellious and disobedient behavior that led to this consequence. The mother simply held him accountable for his irresponsible behavior.

When we hold people accountable for their irresponsible behavior, we demonstrate that we are a safe person. We also help that other person with a problem to begin to strip away the false beliefs that you can sin without any consequences.

Boundaries are not just for avoiding bad behavior, they are also a tool to focus on positive behavior.

Look to God for help. He has promised that when we are weak He is ready to give us all the power we need to be successful. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

You may want to enlist the help of a trusted friend or family member and say, "This is an area of my life where I am seeking to live within this boundary. Will you please hold me accountable, and if you see me stepping outside that boundary, then please let me know."

Or ask them to check up on you each day or weekly to see how you are doing. Having a relationship of accountability can be a powerful motivator to keep moving in the right direction.

As you develop healthy boundaries in your life, you will become that safe person that others will value as a friend—one who is responsible, self-controlled, living in freedom, and appropriately expressing genuine love. You will also be in a better position to help your children and others around you to develop better boundaries in their lives.

### For further study

For further study on this topic there are several excellent books by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. Most of these books also have a workbook. All are published by Zondervan.

**Boundaries**

**Boundaries with Kids**

**Boundaries in Marriage**

**Boundaries in Dating**

**Safe People**

## Building positive, safe relationships with Boundaries Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences.

1. What are some of the boundaries that are important in your life today?
2. Which kind of boundaries are the greatest challenge in your life today?
  - A. Physical boundaries
  - B. Mental boundaries
  - C. Emotional boundaries
  - D. Spiritual boundaries
3. Read Galatians 6:7-10.
  - A. Give one example of where you failed to honor a boundary in your life and the consequences that followed.
  - B. Give one example of where you chose to live within a boundary and the consequences that followed this decision.
4. Read Galatians 6:4-5. How difficult is it for you to set boundaries for yourself and follow through on them?
5. Read the verses from Psalm 119 on the top of page 4 of this resource. (Vs. 9-11, 14, 16, 20, 24, 45, 71-72, 105, 129, 131) Which verse is most helpful to you in focusing your attitude toward boundaries? Explain your answer.
6. What is one boundary you need to set for your life today? What are the challenges you face in putting this into action in your life?

See page 3 for additional scriptures related to the issue of boundaries.



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