

The House with Invisible Walls

A metaphor that helps us understand the need for consistency in limit-setting with children is that of a house with invisible walls. Pretend you live in a house with invisible walls. These are like the limits we set for children. Surely limits must seem invisible and arbitrary to children. By testing the walls, you would be able to figure out that the kitchen was just inside the front door and two steps to the left and that the bedroom was eight steps down the hall. Then, *if you weren't hungry or tired*, you could move around the house without bumping into the walls.

But what if someone came in while you were sleeping and moved the walls? Perhaps you would get out of bed in the morning and bang into the kitchen door. Or maybe you wouldn't be able to find it. What would you do? Probably, you'd start over, *bouncing off the walls to figure out where they were*. Some people would give up testing after a time and withdraw. In any event, whatever you had intended to do for the day would be impossible or postponed.

When adults set limits consistently, children begin to learn where those walls are. They learn to control their own actions before they run into the limits set for them. Setting consistent limits helps children to learn this inner control. And ultimately, setting limits makes the adult's job easier. (Adapted from *Infant and Toddler Experiences*, Hast & Hollyfield, 1999)