

Setting Boundaries With Abusive Parents

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1. WHAT ARE BOUNDARIES — and Why Are They Important?

Boundaries are clear limits that protect your emotional, physical, mental, spiritual, relational, and financial well-being. They define:

- What behaviors you will and will not accept
- How you expect to be treated
- What you will do if someone violates those limits

A boundary is **not** about controlling another person.

It is about controlling your own response, access, participation, and protection.

Healthy Boundary Formula

A healthy boundary usually includes:

1. **The behavior**
2. **Your limit**
3. **The consequence/action you will take**

Example:

“If yelling starts during a phone call, I will end the conversation.”

Why Boundaries Are Especially Important With Abusive Parents

In abusive or toxic family systems, boundaries are often:

- Ignored
- Punished
- Mocked
- Manipulated
- Treated as “disrespect”

Children raised in abusive homes are often conditioned to:

- Feel guilty for saying no
- Prioritize parents' emotions over their own
- Fear conflict or rejection
- Accept mistreatment to keep peace
- Believe love must be earned through compliance

Boundaries help reverse these unhealthy patterns.

Boundaries Can Help You:

- Feel emotionally safer
- Reduce anxiety and resentment
- Protect your marriage and children
- Improve self-respect
- Stop enabling abuse
- Clarify expectations
- Create healthier relationships
- Heal from trauma and enmeshment

Important Truths About Boundaries

Boundaries Are About Protection, Not Punishment

Boundaries are not revenge.
They are protective limits.

Boundaries Without Consequences Are Requests

If there is no action when the line is crossed, the boundary usually will not hold.

You Do Not Need Permission to Have Boundaries

You are allowed to:

- Say no
- End conversations
- Limit access
- Leave unsafe situations
- Protect your peace
- Refuse manipulation

Pushback Is Common

Abusive or controlling parents often react with:

- Guilt trips
- Anger
- Silent treatment
- Playing the victim
- Religious manipulation
- Financial pressure
- Family triangulation
- Smear campaigns

Pushback does not automatically mean the boundary is wrong.

HOW TO SET BOUNDARIES: WORKSHEET

Step 1 — Identify the Problem Behavior and How it Affects You

Problem Behavior	How It Affects Me
Example: Mom criticizes my parenting	I feel anxious and ashamed

Step 2 — Identify the Boundary Needed & Types of Boundaries

Emotional Boundaries

Protect feelings and emotional energy.

Examples:

- “I will not stay in conversations where I am insulted.”
- “I will not discuss deeply personal matters.”

Verbal Boundaries

Protect against yelling, threats, insults, sarcasm, or shaming.

Examples:

- “If yelling begins, I will leave.”
- “I will not continue conversations involving name-calling.”

Physical Boundaries

Protect physical space and safety.

Examples:

- “Do not enter my home uninvited.”
- “Physical intimidation is not acceptable.”

Time Boundaries

Protect schedule, energy, and availability.

Examples:

- “I can talk for 20 minutes.”
- “We will visit only once per month.”

Digital Boundaries

Protect phone, texting, email, and social media access.

Examples:

- “I will not respond to abusive texts.”
- “I will block repeated harassment.”

Financial Boundaries

Protect money, resources, and dependency.

Examples:

- “I will not lend money.”
- “Financial gifts will not give access or control.”

Parenting/Family Boundaries

Protect spouse and children.

Examples:

- “Do not undermine our parenting.”
- “Our children will not be exposed to yelling or manipulation.”

Step 3 — Create the Boundary Statement

Boundary Formula

“If _____ happens, then I will _____.”

Examples:

- “If you begin insulting me, I will end the call.”
- “If our parenting decisions are criticized repeatedly, visits will become less frequent.”
- “If you show up unannounced, we will not answer the door.”

Step 4 — Define Consequences

Consequences should be:

- Clear
- Realistic
- Immediate when possible
- Enforceable
- Focused on your actions

Examples of Healthy Consequences

Boundary Violation	Consequence
Yelling	End conversation
Insults	Leave gathering
Repeated manipulation	Reduce contact
Harassment texting	Mute/block temporarily
Disrespect toward spouse	Pause visits
Undermining parenting	Supervised contact only
Threats/intimidation	No contact / authorities if needed

Personal Boundary Planning Worksheet

My Most Important Boundary

Behavior:

Boundary:

Consequence:

What Makes This Hard for Me?

(Check any that apply)

- ☐ Fear of guilt
- ☐ Fear of rejection
- ☐ Fear of conflict
- ☐ Financial dependence
- ☐ Religious pressure
- ☐ Fear of retaliation
- ☐ Fear of disappointing others
- ☐ Trauma/freeze response
- ☐ Wanting approval
- ☐ Fear of being called selfish

Other:

What Support Do I Need?

- Therapist
- Spouse
- Friend
- Support group
- Pastor/clergy
- Legal protection
- Financial independence plan
- Safety plan

3. HOW TO COMMUNICATE BOUNDARIES TO PARENTS / FAMILY

General Principles

Be Clear - Do not over-explain or over-justify.

Be Calm - Boundaries are strongest when communicated simply and calmly.

Be Direct - Avoid vague hints.

Be Consistent - Consistency teaches people the new pattern.

Do Not Debate Your Boundary - You can explain once. You do not need to repeatedly defend yourself.

Simple Boundary Scripts

Basic Script: “I’m no longer willing to participate in conversations where I’m insulted. If it happens, I will leave or end the call.”

When They Interrupt or Dismiss You: “I understand you disagree. This is still the boundary I’m setting.”

When They Say You’re Disrespectful: “Respect goes both ways. I’m asking for respectful communication.”

When They Guilt-Trip You: “I understand you’re upset. My decision remains the same.”

When They Demand Explanations: “I’ve explained my position already. I’m not going to continue debating it.”

When They Violate the Boundary: “I said I would leave if yelling started. I’m ending the conversation now.”

Then follow through calmly.

Communication Tips

Use “I” Statements

Instead of: “You’re abusive and impossible.” Try: “I’m no longer willing to engage in conversations where I’m yelled at.”

Avoid Long Emotional Defenses

Long explanations often invite arguments and manipulation. Shorter is usually stronger.

Expect Testing

Many abusive parents test boundaries repeatedly at first.

This does not mean the boundary failed.

Don’t Announce Consequences You Won’t Enforce

Small, consistent boundaries are stronger than dramatic threats.

Levels of Contact - Sometimes boundaries require adjusting the level of relationship access.

Full Contact With Boundaries

Relationship continues with clear limits.

Limited Contact

Reduced frequency, shorter visits, controlled topics.

Structured Contact

Only written communication, supervised visits, public settings, etc.

Temporary No Contact

Used when emotional or physical safety requires distance.

Permanent No Contact

Sometimes necessary in severe abuse situations.

Final Encouragement

Setting boundaries with abusive parents is emotionally difficult because it often challenges lifelong conditioning around fear, guilt, obligation, and loyalty.

Healthy boundaries are not cruelty.

They are a form of emotional honesty and self-protection.

You are allowed to protect:

- Your peace
- Your marriage
- Your children
- Your emotional health
- Your safety
- Your recovery and healing

The goal is not to control abusive parents.
The goal is to stop abandoning yourself.