

# Limit Setting

## with Mood Disorders

Understanding how to establish safe, supportive household guidelines for children and teens with mood disorders such as bipolar and its phenotype TSDD (known as Fear of Harm, or FOH), and how to introduce and maintain limits with compassion.

Stability is a milestone worth celebrating, but the work of parenting a child with a mood disorder does not end there. Establishing clear, consistent, and compassionate limits is one of the most powerful things a caregiver can do for a child's long-term wellbeing.

Limit setting is not the same as discipline. It is not about consequences or punishment. It is about building a shared understanding of what is acceptable at home, and offering children the security of knowing what to expect.

**Children with mood disorders feel safer — and behave more reliably — when they understand the rules and helped create them.**

Children's Mental Health Resource Center provides parent groups, education for providers, and community building to support you and your family's mental health. Share your experience. Accept support. Let others who have walked this path help light the way, because together, families are stronger, more hopeful, and better equipped to give their children what they truly need. You're not alone. We're here to help.

## A Guide for Parents & Caregivers

Once effective treatment has begun and your child's mood has stabilized, it's time to start thinking about limit setting. Limits are not punishments. They are a gentle and supportive framework that helps children feel cared for and safe.

**This brochure offers honest, practical guidance for parents and caregivers navigating the challenge of setting limits with children who have mood disorders.**



Limits set with warmth and consistency give children a framework they can rely on — and a sense of security they deeply need.

Children with mood disorders have a biological vulnerability to dysregulated emotions. Their behavior is not simply a matter of choice or defiance. Caregivers who understand this can approach limit setting with compassion rather than frustration, and firmness rather than punishment.

**Rules established with a child's input, introduced at the right time, and enforced with kindness are far more likely to take root — and to bring the whole family closer in the process.**



*Is limit setting the same as discipline?*

**NO** Discipline aims to end certain behaviors and teach new ones. Limit setting is about establishing basic domestic guidelines that support acceptable choices and help the child feel safe and cared for.

*Should rules be introduced during difficult moments?*

**NO** Rules must be introduced when the child is in a stable mood state so they can be as receptive as possible and the rules won't be perceived as a threat.

*Can children with mood disorders participate in creating rules?*

**YES** Children must be included as active participants in establishing rules and guidelines. They are individuals with valid needs whose quality of life is a priority.

*Should I tell my child about a reward before they complete a task?*

**NO** Having a reward appear spontaneously after the task is completed eliminates the anxiety that the prospect of a reward can trigger. For a child with a mood disorder, knowing about a reward beforehand can feel like unbearable pressure.

*Is it acceptable to sometimes do a chore for my child?*

**YES** If a child has reached the end of their stamina or emotional gas tank, stepping in and removing the burden of the chore can be as effective in teaching limits as forcing follow-through — and is a kindness worth extending.

*Should I hold my child to age-appropriate standards?*

**NO** Kids with mood disorders tend not to be developmentally aligned with their chronological age. A more useful question is: what are they already capable of, and how can we help them build from there?

Based on educational content regarding the treatment of mood disorders in children and teens provided by Children's Mental Health Resource Center.

## START FROM WHERE THEY ARE

Children with mood disorders often lag behind their chronological age developmentally. Rather than asking what a child 'should' be able to do, ask what they are already capable of. Build rules and expectations that match their actual capacity, and celebrate growth in small increments.

**Introduce limits only during moments of calm and stability. When a child is regulated, they can hear the message. When they are dysregulated, limits will be felt as threats — and the conversation will backfire.**

## POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

When a child completes a task or follows a guideline, offer praise warmly and specifically. If you choose to give a reward, let it be a spontaneous surprise after the task is done — not announced in advance. The anticipation of a promised reward can be overwhelming for a child with a mood disorder, triggering anxiety rather than motivation.

*If a child has reached the end of their emotional gas tank, it is perfectly acceptable — even wise — to step in and complete the task for them. Removing the burden in that moment is its own lesson in compassion.*

**ON KNOWING WHEN TO STEP IN**

## What Limit Setting *Really* Means

Limit setting is the process of establishing basic household rules and guidelines for acceptable behavior. Unlike discipline — which aims to stop unwanted behaviors — **limit setting is about creating a safe, predictable structure that the child can rely on.**

## INCLUDE YOUR CHILD IN THE PROCESS

Children who help create the rules are far more likely to follow them. Sit down together during a calm moment. Ask for their input. Let them know their needs and preferences matter, and that this is a shared agreement — not a set of demands handed down from above.

When creating limits with your child, keep the list short and focused. Too many rules at once can feel overwhelming. Start with the most essential expectations — safety, basic chores, screen time — and introduce more as the family finds its footing.

Principles for effective limit setting:

1. **Timing.** Introduce rules only when your child is in a stable, regulated mood state — never during a crisis or escalation.
2. **Collaboration.** Treat your child as an active participant with valid needs. Their buy-in matters and makes a real difference.
3. **Consistency.** Enforce limits gently but reliably. Inconsistency undermines the sense of safety that limits are meant to provide.
4. **Flexibility.** Know when to hold the line and when to step in with kindness. A caregiver who can read the moment is more effective than one who follows rules rigidly.

## Signs of *Progress* in Limit Setting

Progress in limit setting may look different than you expect. It is rarely dramatic or immediate. Watch for small, consistent signs that your child is beginning to internalize the guidelines and respond with growing reliability.

Healthy progress may look like:

- Completing a chore or task without being asked more than once
- Expressing frustration with the rule but following it anyway
- Asking for help rather than shutting down or erupting
- Remembering a guideline without a reminder
- Accepting that a planned activity is postponed without a full meltdown
- Showing pride in having completed something difficult
- Returning to a task after a break, rather than abandoning it

*Rules introduced during calm moments, created together, and enforced with warmth become the foundation of a child's growing confidence and self-regulation.*

*That foundation, once built, lasts.*

**ON THE LONG-TERM VALUE OF LIMIT SETTING**

**Children who grow up with clear, compassionate limits learn to trust the adults around them — and, in time, to trust themselves. To a child navigating a mood disorder, that sense of reliability is everything.**