Compassionate Limits: How to Say No Without Leaving a Child Feeling Unheard

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Why understanding a child's feelings does not mean abandoning reasonable expectations

One of the hardest things about working with children who have challenging behavior is learning how to be compassionate and firm at the same time.

Some adults are naturally comfortable setting limits. They can say no, maintain an expectation, and follow through without much hesitation. But they may struggle to recognize when a child needs understanding, reassurance, or help communicating.

Other adults are wonderfully sensitive to children's emotions. They recognize distress quickly and want to do everything they can to help. But they may struggle to maintain an expectation when the child becomes upset.

Both qualities matter. Children need adults who are willing to understand them, and they need adults who can provide fair, consistent boundaries.

The real skill is learning to do both.

Three Responsibilities That Belong Together

I often describe my approach to challenging behavior using three principles:

Acknowledge the reason for the behavior. Set a fair and firm limit. Teach a new way.

These principles are not a rigid script. They are responsibilities that guide our decisions.

Acknowledging the reason for the behavior means trying to understand what the child is experiencing or attempting to accomplish. Setting a limit means determining what can and cannot happen in that situation. Teaching a new way means helping the child develop a more effective response.

The three are closely connected. We should not teach limits without communication, and we should not assume that acknowledging a child's feelings requires us to remove every expectation.

Consider a Child Who Wants to Ride a Scooter

Imagine that a child loves riding a scooter. It is one of her favorite activities, and she knows that scooter time is coming later in the afternoon.

But first, the group is scheduled to play a short matching game.

The child requests the scooter. Her therapist explains that the game comes first, but the child continues requesting the scooter and eventually begins screaming.

What should the therapist do?

One option is to allow her to skip the game and ride the scooter immediately. That might end the screaming, but it could also teach her that screaming is an effective way to change the schedule.

Another option is to insist that she complete the game without making any effort to acknowledge her frustration. That may preserve the expectation, but it misses an important opportunity to communicate and build trust.

I would approach the situation differently.

Start by Showing the Child That You Understand

I might get down to the child's level and say, "I hear you. You really want to ride the scooter. You're looking forward to it, and you don't want to play this game right now."

If she has a communication book, I might help her locate the picture for scooter and give her an opportunity to request it. If she can use words, I might model, "I want scooter."

Then I would acknowledge her communication.

"Thank you for telling me. I know what you want."

That response matters because the child needs to know that her message has reached me. She does not have to keep escalating in order to convince me that I understand.

But understanding her request does not mean I am going to grant it immediately.

Make the Limit Clear and Manageable

Next, I would explain what needs to happen.

“First, we’re going to take three turns playing this game. Then we’re going downstairs to ride the scooter.”

I would show her the game, demonstrate what a turn looks like, and use a first-then visual if that would help her understand.

Three turns is a concrete expectation. It is easier to understand than a vague instruction to “play the game first.”

I might then ask, “Game first, then scooter. Does that sound okay?”

The child may agree, or she may still be unhappy. Her agreement is not a prerequisite for the expectation, and her refusal is information we should consider rather than a reason to escalate the confrontation.

If she participates, we follow through. We finish the agreed-upon turns and go to the scooter.

She learns that adults can hear her request, maintain a reasonable expectation, and keep their promises.

What If She Continues Screaming?

This is where understanding the function of the behavior becomes especially important.

Perhaps she is still confused about the schedule. Perhaps she is overwhelmed by the game. Perhaps the task is too difficult, or perhaps she has learned from experience that screaming sometimes changes an adult’s decision.

Those possibilities require different responses.

I might simplify the game, offer help, show the schedule again, or give her time to regulate. I might offer a choice about how to participate. If she needs a brief period in a quieter environment, I can support that without treating it as punishment.

But I would not automatically remove a reasonable expectation simply because she screamed.

The important distinction is between supporting a child through difficulty and teaching her that escalation is the most effective way to escape every difficult situation.

Active Listening and Reflective Communication

Two skills are especially useful when a child is upset: active listening and reflective communication.

Active listening begins with the attitude, “Help me understand.”

We pay attention to what the child is doing, consider the circumstances, and give her opportunities to communicate. We do not assume that we already know what the behavior means.

Reflective communication means putting our understanding into words and checking whether we have understood correctly.

“You wanted scooter, and I told you it was time for the game. You’re upset because you wanted scooter right now. Is that right?”

If the child indicates yes, we have made progress. We may not have solved the disagreement, but we have established a shared understanding of what the disagreement is about.

That is meaningful communication.

Co-Regulation Is Not Giving In

Sometimes a child is so distressed that she needs help becoming calm enough to understand what we are saying.

I may sit beside her, speak gently, reduce unnecessary stimulation, or simply remain present. I might acknowledge that she is disappointed and give her a moment to recover.

This is co-regulation. We are helping the child manage an emotional experience that she may not yet be able to manage independently.

Co-regulation does not require us to change the answer from no to yes. It does not mean that every demand disappears or that every preferred activity becomes immediately available.

It means that we remain a supportive adult while the child experiences a difficult emotion.

The child can be disappointed and still be safe. She can be frustrated and still be loved. She can hear no and still know that we are listening.

When a Limit Needs to Change

Consistency is important, but consistency should never become an excuse for inflexibility.

If we discover that the child is in pain, frightened, exhausted, overwhelmed, or unable to complete a task as presented, we should reconsider the expectation. If the activity is unnecessary, developmentally inappropriate, or excessively difficult, we may need to change it.

A reasonable limit is not reasonable merely because an adult established it.

We also need to distinguish between a child who is struggling to communicate and a child who has clearly communicated a preference that cannot be accommodated at that moment. The response should be informed by assessment, not by assumptions about whether the child is being defiant.

Relationships Make Limits Easier to Accept

Children are more willing to accept inconvenience from adults they trust.

When a child knows that we enjoy being with her, that we listen when she communicates, and that we regularly provide enjoyable experiences, a difficult moment occurs within a much larger relationship.

She learns that our limits are not expressions of anger or rejection. They are part of a predictable environment in which she is cared for and supported.

That trust is built during hundreds of ordinary interactions, not just during behavioral crises.

We cannot expect children to trust us in their most difficult moments if we have not invested in the relationship during their best ones.

Compassion and Firmness Are Not Opposites

The purpose of compassionate limit-setting is not to win a confrontation. It is to help children learn that they can communicate, experience disappointment, and continue participating in life.

Sometimes the answer will be yes. Sometimes it will be no. Sometimes it will be, “Yes, but not yet.”

In every case, we want the child to know that her communication matters.

We can acknowledge what a child wants without giving her everything she wants. We can maintain expectations without withdrawing our compassion. And we can teach better behavior without making a child feel that her feelings are wrong.

Continue learning

Open the companion resource and choose the next practical step.

https://accessiblebehavior.com/go/compassionate-limits-how-to-say-no-without-leaving-a-child-feeling-unheard

About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

Scope and safety

This article provides general educational information. It is not individualized medical, behavioral, mental-health, legal, or emergency advice. Individual support should consider the learner’s communication, health, safety, disability-related needs, culture, and context.

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