

Say what you mean and mean what you say

A couple at Care for the Family have two adopted children, and on the first meeting with their children found how important it was to keep to set boundaries.

We adopted our son and daughter two and a half years ago, and going from a family who had no children to a family who had two toddlers was a very steep learning curve for us. When our children came to us, our daughter especially was a complete whirlwind. She was only three, and for her whole life she had lived in complete chaos and had been given no real boundaries. She was very strong willed, and up until that point she had been allowed to do whatever she wanted, whether it was good for her or not!

My work has given me the privilege of being able to go to many Care for the Family events and having access to their resources. I therefore understood that what my daughter needed to feel safe and secure was for us to give her firm and consistent boundaries. A large part of being able to do that that is to say what you mean and mean what you say. This was vitally important to us at the start of our journey with our children, and I honestly believe it was one of the main reasons our daughter soon felt safe in our family.

This started from the very first week of us being introduced to them. We were warned beforehand that our daughter would take a long time to bond with me and form an attachment – the deep feeling of security and safety a child has in a healthy relationship with a parent or carer. I needed to be prepared that she would form an attachment to my husband long before she ever would to me.

I remember an occasion where we were in the foster carer's garden and our daughter was being pushed on the swing by the foster carer.

It was my turn to push her, and she was not happy about it. She didn't want me to push her, she wanted the foster carer. At this point it would have been so easy to just let her have what she wanted. At the start you are just so desperate for them to like you that you want to do anything to make them happy. But I suddenly realised "No, I'm this little girl's mum now, and I need to do what's best for her, not what is going to make me most comfortable." So I gave her a choice (it is important to give children choices so they don't feel forced to do something): either she could have me push her, or she could come off of the swing and go and play on something else with me.

She looked at me and said, "I don't want Mummy to push me", so I looked at her, smiled and said "OK, well I'll take you off and we can go and play on something else then." She fought me for a while, insisting she was going to stay on and she was going to have the foster carer push her, but I had said what I meant and had meant what I said, and I wasn't going to be swayed on it. She looked at me with such confusion – I don't think anyone had ever stood up to her before. But then as I went to pick her up to take her off she laughed and said, "It's OK, I want Mummy to push me now."

That was such a turning point for us as a family. After that situation she clung to me. The social workers were all amazed at how quickly she was attaching to me and the relationship we were forming. But it's not always easy.

One thing I learnt early on was to think about the options carefully before saying them. We have had many a family film night cancelled, visiting friends forgone, and TV banned (which I think I have found harder than the kids to deal with!) But even if you have said something that will inconvenience you, you need to follow through with it anyway once you have said it.



For us, this made all the difference.

Our daughter was initially terrified of being taken away every time her social worker came to visit, but when she understood that we always meant what we said, she believed us when we said she wasn't going to be taken away again. When we left her with family to go to meetings, she believed us when we said we were coming back for her. When we tell her that she is precious, beautiful and loved, she knows this is true because she knows that her mummy and daddy say what they mean and mean what they say.

If our little girl, who has been through so much upheaval, could learn to trust us and become slightly less of a whirlwind as a result, I think this technique would work for many other families too.

For more information on adoption and fostering go to the [Home for Good](http://www.homeforgood.org.uk) website.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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