

FAIR, FIRM, AND CONSISTENT

What does it mean to be fair, firm, and consistent? Why is it important when working with children and youth? How does someone develop these skills?

These are all very good questions, and ones that need to be asked continuously. As professionals in the child and youth development field, it means working on these skills all the time. It is never ending. Even the most experienced professional has moments of self-doubt. It means being self-reflective and learning by watching others work with children and youth, asking for feedback, seeking advice, and re-playing interactions in your mind that you have had with children and youth in order to learn from them.

No one person is fair, firm and consistent 100% of the time, but we can each increase these if we pay attention to them and work to develop them. First, it helps to have definitions of each so that we know what it is we are trying to do.

BEING FAIR

To be fair when working with people can mean many things. Here are some examples:

- Making sure everyone is treated with respect
- Making sure that everyone has access to resources such as supplies, materials, computers, your time and attention
- Listening to both sides when there is a conflict, and not jumping to conclusions about what happened, or taking sides in an argument
- When consequences for behavior are necessary, making sure they fit what happened. For example, if a youth makes a big mess and leaves the center, a consequence can be helping to clean up the center the next day (rather than making him or her sit out from other activities).
- Sharing decisions with children and youth about things that affect them. For example, younger children can be presented with choices about what to do that day, while older children and youth can help plan activities.
- What are some other examples of being fair when working with children and youth?

Being fair does not mean treating everyone the same. This is known as *equity*. It means treating people the way they need to be treated, not the way everyone is treated. For example, a child who has a physical disability should have access to an elevator to get to the second floor of the building, even if it is off-limits to other children. Equity is a difficult concept for younger children to grasp because of their developmental levels. They will tend to see the world only from their point-of-view, and may see that someone getting or doing something different than them as unfair. It is important to stop and talk through these instances to help children understand why certain decisions are made that may seem unfair to them.

BEING FIRM

There is a delicate balance between being too harsh and too soft when working with children and youth. Some people want everyone to like them, so they err on the side of being too gentle. Others want people to respect them so they err on the side of being too harsh. The reality is that it is not about either being respected or being liked, it is about both of those things. Think of it as a teeter-totter:

Too Harsh

Firm

Too Gentle



Being too harsh means that people will be afraid of you. They will try and protect themselves when you're around by avoiding you, challenging you, or misbehaving in order to get thrown out. Being too gentle, on the other hand, means that people can walk all over you, and generally do not respect you. They know they can do whatever they want when you're

around so they may ignore you, challenge you, or misbehave because they know they can get away with anything. Notice that many of the behaviors are the same if you are too harsh or too gentle – but for different reasons.

Being firm means balancing between harshness and gentleness by showing respect to everyone. It means:

- That you can be playful at times, and serious at times.
- Holding yourself and those around you accountable for their behavior, and not letting things slide.
- Sharing responsibility with children and youth
- Advocating for children and youth
- Setting boundaries
- Having high expectations for behavior and how people treat each other
- Challenging children and youth to be better and grow
- Supporting children and youth to be better and grow
- Setting rules and standards together and making sure they are used
- What are some other examples of being firm when working with children and youth?

Finding the balance point of firmness: We will never be perfect, so it is important to notice when we may be too harsh or too gentle, and then working to find the balance. Here are two examples:

You yell at a youth for making a mess and then get into an argument with her. It ends with you ordering her to clean it up and then walking away. You realize that 1) you did not treat her with respect because you yelled at her and 2) you did not stop to find out what the mess was about. First, you calm down, and then you ask to talk to her for a moment. You first apologize for yelling, and then say, “I did not check in with you about what was going on. I would like to do that now. Let’s see if we can make this right.” She says that the mess was made during an art project and that she had simply neglected to clean it up. You respond by saying, “Thank you for your explanation. I appreciate your honesty.” We all need to keep the center clean because so many people use it. Would you like some help cleaning it up, or can you handle it yourself?” She says that she will clean it up on her own now. You say, “In the future I will check in with you about a mess rather than yell. That way I can draw your attention to it and you can get it cleaned up. Please let me know how well I follow through on this.”

Every day for a week a group of young men come into the center and immediately go to the kitchen. They get out lots of food and eat it. You figure that they are growing and are hungry so you just let it happen. The result, though, is that the snack you had for everybody for the whole month is gone in a week. You go to your supervisor to tell her that there is no food, and she says, “Why did you let them eat it all?” You feel resentment because she is blaming you rather than the youth. After all, they were the ones who ate it! Your supervisor helps you understand that you are in charge of the snacks, not the youth, and you have to work it out with them. She is willing to buy more food for the month if there is a plan in place for how to make it last. You call a meeting with all of the youth and tell them about the situation. Without using names, you say that the snack this month hasn’t lasted, and that there needs to be a system so that everyone has equal access to the food, and it can last through the month. With the youth, you agree that a different person is responsible for getting out the snack each day in the appropriate portions and everyone gets one. The youth make a chart for the month and hang it in the kitchen.

BEING CONSISTENT

One thing that human beings are very good at is being consistently inconsistent. This means that being consistent is difficult and takes a lot of practice. Being consistent when working with children and youth means that they know what to expect from you.

Consistency means that you are reliable, dependable, and trustworthy. Here are some examples:

- Following through on what you say you will do. If, for example, a child asks you to come to their soccer game at school and you agree – you show up.
- When you make a mistake, you make it right.
- Every day you make a point to greet children and youth by name as they arrive.
- You are even-tempered rather than angry one minute and laughing the next.
- Listening to what people say and acting on their suggestions
- What are some other examples of being consistent when working with children and youth?

One of the best ways to be consistent is to notice things about people and check in with them. For example, a child talks about his new bike. The next time you see him, you ask him about his bike. Another example is when a child or youth is acting differently than usual. You check in with her or him by saying you're noticing something is different. You can then ask if everything is OK, if something exciting or difficult has happened, and/or if they would like to talk about it.

Being consistent may be one of the most difficult skills to develop. Being aware is the first step. Then it takes patience and perseverance to become more consistently consistent.

DEVELOPING THE SKILLS TO BE FAIR, FIRM, AND CONSISTENT

Working as a professional with children and youth takes a great deal of patience, both with the young people and with yourself. It also means developing a skill that can be described as the "observer's eye." This is sometimes known as the "third eye" because it allows you to see a situation as an observer, and not as a participant. In this way, you strive to see a situation from the child/youth's point of view, from your point of view, and from an observer's point of view. Here is an example:

You look out the window to see a child urinating on someone's bicycle. It is easy to see that this is inappropriate behavior, and it would also be easy to jump to the conclusion that this child is being hateful for no reason whatsoever (your point-of-view). You use the "observer's eye" by saying to yourself, "This may not be what it seems, let's calm down and find out what is going on." You then go outside and firmly ask the child to stop what he is doing. He does so immediately and starts crying. You ask what is going on and he replies, "I had to go so bad. I knew I wouldn't make it inside." You ask, "Why were you going on this person's bike?" He says, "I wasn't, I was peeing on this flower." You now know that it just looked like he was urinating on the bicycle because of the where you were looking out of the window. The problem for you to work on has now changed from a hateful act to one of supporting the child with his bodily functions.

This example shows that many (if not most) times an adult sees an incident, there is more to it than meets the eye. The "observer's eye" allows you to take a step back from a situation, and take a moment to find out what might really be going on. It is a tool that can help you be more fair, firm, and consistent

As stated earlier, developing these skills means being self-reflective and learning by watching others work with children and youth, asking for feedback, seeking advice, and re-playing interactions in your mind that you have had with children and youth in order to learn from them. Wendell Berry has a saying that sums this up:

"It is not from ourselves that we will learn to be better than we are."

In the same way that we want to help children and youth grow, we must also be ready to let others help us grow.

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