

## EXERCISE: PRACTICING BOUNDARIES

When you live in a hoarded home, your boundaries about your personal space and belongings are often ignored or dismissed. Your parent might put things in your room, take your things, or treat your space like storage. Learning to set and maintain boundaries—even when they're repeatedly violated—is a crucial skill.

This exercise helps you practice boundary-setting in a situation where you have limited power, and gives you strategies for what to do when your boundaries aren't respected

Important: This exercise acknowledges that you may not be able to enforce all your boundaries right now. That doesn't mean they're not worth setting. You're practicing for your future while doing what you can in the present.

### Time Needed

20-30 minutes



### Energy Level

Medium-High

(requires emotional energy)



### What You'll Need

Paper and something to write with

### When to Do This

When you're ready to start advocating for yourself, or when boundary violations are causing significant distress

### ▲ SAFETY WARNING ▲

Boundary-setting can sometimes trigger negative reactions. Before practicing these strategies, honestly assess whether it is safe for you to set boundaries with your parent.

#### If your parent has a history of:

- Physical violence or threats when challenged
- Extreme verbal abuse or rage reactions
- Destroying your belongings in retaliation
- Punishing you severely for asserting yourself

#### Then direct boundary-setting may not be safe right now. In unsafe situations, you can:

- Practice "quiet boundaries" (enforce silently without announcing)
- Work on internal boundaries (knowing what you deserve even if you can't say it)
- Build skills for when you're independent and safe
- Focus on other toolkit exercises that don't require confrontation
- Talk to a trusted adult, counselor, or call a helpline

If you're unsure whether it's safe, start with the softest boundary language and see how it's received before escalating.

**Remember: You can't practice healthy boundaries in an unhealthy, unsafe environment. Sometimes survival means waiting until you have real power and safety. That's not failure—that's wisdom.**

## How It Works

You'll identify what boundaries you want, practice setting them, prepare for pushback, and develop strategies for when boundaries are violated.

### Step 1: Identify Your Boundaries

#### What boundaries do you want around your personal space and belongings?

Check the ones that matter to you, or write your own:

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|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>About my room/space:</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> I want people to knock before entering my room                        |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want my door to stay closed/locked when I'm not there               |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't want other people's belongings stored in my room              |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to control what goes in and out of my space                    |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't want people going through my things                           |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to be able to throw away trash from my own space               |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want one area (desk, bed, corner) that stays clear of others' items |
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|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>About my belongings:</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> I want my things to stay where I put them             |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't want people taking my things without asking   |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to decide what I keep and what I get rid of    |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I want my clean laundry to stay clean and put away    |
|                             | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't want to be responsible for others' belongings |
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|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>About decision-making:</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> I want a say in what happens in my personal space              |
|                               | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to have a discussion before changes are made to my area |
|                               | <input type="checkbox"/> I want my "no" to be respected                                 |
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My most important boundary right now is: \_\_\_\_\_

### Step 2: Understand Why Boundaries Get Dismissed

#### In hoarding situations, boundaries often get violated because:

- The parent's need to acquire/keep items overrides your needs
- The parent doesn't recognize your space as separate from theirs
- Hoarding disorder impairs their ability to respect boundaries
- They may feel defensive or attacked when you set limits
- They prioritize their comfort over your autonomy
- Mental illness makes it hard for them to see your perspective

**This is NOT your fault.** You deserve boundaries even if your parent can't respect them. Understanding why it happens doesn't excuse it, but it helps you:

- Recognize it's not personal (it's the disorder)
- Set realistic expectations
- Protect yourself emotionally
- Plan appropriate strategies

### Step 3: Practice Setting Boundaries (Language)

How you say it matters. Here are different ways to set boundaries:

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#### Direct and Clear

Best when: You have some power in the relationship, safety isn't a concern

#### Examples:

- "I need you to knock before entering my room."
- "Please don't put your things in my space. I need this area clear."
- "I'm throwing away the trash in my room. This is not negotiable."
- "My backpack is off-limits. Please don't go through it."

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#### Collaborative

Best when: You want to find middle ground, relationship is somewhat cooperative

#### Examples:

- "Can we make a rule that my desk stays clear of other items?"
- "I'm trying to keep my corner organized. Can you help me by not storing things there?"
- "What if we agree: your stuff stays in these areas, my stuff stays in mine?"

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#### Boundaries with Consequences

Best when: Direct requests aren't working, you can follow through

#### Examples:

- "If items get put in my room, I'll move them to [designated area]."
- "If my door isn't staying closed, I'll need to add a lock."
- "If my things keep disappearing, I'll need to store them somewhere else."

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#### Soft Boundaries

Best when: Safety is a concern, you need to protect yourself first

#### Examples:

- "I'm working on organizing my space." (while quietly removing things)
- "I need some things to stay in my room for school." (establishing minimum territory)
- "I'm trying to keep track of my belongings better." (creating distance without confrontation)

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Practice writing one boundary statement for your most important boundary:

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Using (Direct/Collaborative/With Consequences/Soft) language:

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## Step 4: Prepare for Pushback

### When you set boundaries, your parent might:

- Ignore the boundary entirely
- Get defensive or angry
- Guilt-trip you (“After all I do for you...”)
- Minimize your needs (“It’s not that big a deal”)
- Gaslight you (“I never did that,” or, “You’re overreacting.”)
- Agree but not follow through
- Retaliate by violating more boundaries

### Prepare responses:

If they say: “It’s my house, I can put things where I want”	You can say: “I understand it’s your house. But I live here too, and I’m asking for one small area to keep organized for school/my mental health.”
If they say: “You’re being selfish/ ungrateful”	You can say: “I’m not trying to be ungrateful. I just need some control over my personal space.”
If they say: “I’ll stop, I promise” (but don’t)	You can say: “I appreciate that you want to. Let’s talk about what would help you remember.”
If they get angry	You can say: “I can see this is upsetting. I’m going to give you space.” (Remove yourself if safe)
If they ignore you completely	You can: Repeat the boundary calmly, then take action (move items, lock door if possible/safe)
If they escalate or become threatening	You can: Leave the situation immediately, go to your room or leave the house if safe to do so. Your safety is more important than the boundary.

Write a response to the pushback you’re most likely to encounter:

## Step 5: When Boundaries Are Violated

At some point, your parent will likely violate your boundaries. This doesn’t mean you failed. Here’s what to do:

### Immediate Response:

If it’s safe and you have energy:

- Address it calmly: “Mom/Dad, remember we talked about not putting things in my space?”
- Restate the boundary: “I need this area to stay clear.”
- Take action if possible: Move the item, close your door, etc.

If it's not safe or you don't have energy:

- Let it go in the moment
- Address it later when you (and they) are calmer; sometimes it's better to have these conversations out of the blue
- Or silently enforce your boundary (move items when they're not around)

**Ongoing Response (Assess what reactions each of these might get before use):**

When boundaries are repeatedly violated, you have options:

**Physical enforcement** (if possible):

- Lock your door when you're not there (if safe and allowed)
- Move items back to common areas immediately and consistently
- Keep important items in a locked box or at school
- Create a "staging area" where you put items that don't belong

**Emotional enforcement:**

- Recognize the violation, acknowledge your feelings
- Remind yourself that your boundaries are valid even if they're not respected
- Don't internalize the violation as your fault
- Talk to someone safe about what's happening

**Strategic retreat:**

- Spend less time in violated spaces
- Keep essentials elsewhere (friend's house, locker, car)
- Lower your expectations while maintaining your boundaries internally
- Save energy for battles you can win

**Document patterns** (if needed):

- Keep notes of repeated violations (date, what happened)
- This may be useful if you need to involve authorities or just for your own validation/reminder that this is really happening

## Step 6: Protecting Yourself Emotionally

**Boundary violations hurt. Here's how to protect yourself:**

**Remember:**

- Your boundaries are valid even when ignored
- You're not responsible for enforcing boundaries the parent should respect
- Their inability to respect boundaries is about them, not you
- You're practicing for your future even if it doesn't work now

**Self-talk that helps:**

- "I deserve boundaries even if I can't fully enforce them right now."
- "Setting boundaries is practice, even when they're violated."
- "I'm not powerless. I'm building skills and waiting for real autonomy."
- "One day I'll have complete control over my space."

**When it feels hopeless:**

- You're right—you can't fully control this situation yet
- But you're not doing nothing: you're learning, practicing, preparing
- Every boundary you set is practice for your future
- The skills you're building now will serve you later

**Self-care after violations:**

- Do something that helps you feel in control (organize backpack, make your bed)
- Talk to someone who validates you
- Remind yourself this is temporary
- Use the Calm Corner or other toolkit exercises

## Step 7: Small Wins and Realistic Goals

**You probably can't establish perfect boundaries right now. Focus on small wins, which might look like:**

- Getting your parent to agree to knock (even if they forget sometimes)
- Successfully keeping ONE small area clear for a week
- Moving items out of your space consistently, even if they keep coming back
- Establishing that your backpack (or other area) is off-limits
- Getting locks on one drawer or box
- Having your voice heard, even if the outcome doesn't change

Set one small, realistic boundary goal for this week: \_\_\_\_\_

How will you know if you succeeded? \_\_\_\_\_

## Step 8: When to Get Help

**Sometimes you need outside support to establish or enforce boundaries.**

**Consider getting help when:**

- Your safety is at risk
- Violations are affecting your ability to function (sleep, school, hygiene)
- You're being prevented from accessing your own belongings
- Your space is becoming uninhabitable
- You've tried everything and nothing is working
- You need validation that what's happening isn't okay

**Who might help:**

- Online support communities
- Friends' parents who understand
- Other family members
- Teacher you trust
- School counselor
- Therapist or social worker
- Child Protective Services (if the situation is severe—understand this is a big step)

**What to tell them:**

- "I'm trying to set boundaries about my personal space and they're not being respected."
- "Things keep getting put in my room and I can't keep it organized."
- "I need help figuring out how to protect my space."

**Be specific about what's happening and how it's affecting you**

## Using This Exercise

**Practice regularly:**

- Set one boundary per week and see what happens
- Reflect on what worked and what didn't
- Adjust your approach based on results
- Celebrate small wins

**Be patient with yourself:**

- Boundary-setting is a skill that takes practice
- You won't get it perfect
- Some days you'll enforce boundaries, some days you won't have the energy; both are okay

### **Keep records** (optional but recommended):

- Note which boundaries you set
- Track which ones are respected vs. violated
- Notice patterns

This helps you see progress over time and validates your experience

### **Accessibility Considerations**

This exercise involves emotional work that may be challenging if you have anxiety, depression, or trauma. Pace yourself—you don't have to set all boundaries at once. If verbal communication is difficult, you can write notes, text, or email your boundary statements. If confrontation causes severe anxiety, focus on quiet boundary enforcement (moving items, locks, storing things elsewhere) rather than verbal boundaries. If you have executive function challenges, work with one boundary at a time and use reminders/alarms to help you follow through. There's no shame in needing support from a counselor, teacher, or friend to help you practice and enforce boundaries.

### **Important Reminders**

- **You deserve boundaries.** Even in a hoarded home, even as a minor, even when you can't fully enforce them.
- **Setting boundaries that aren't respected still has value.** You're practicing, establishing what you need, and preparing for when you have real power.
- **Boundary violations are not your fault.** Your parent's inability to respect your space is about their illness/dysfunction, not about you.
- **You can't force someone to respect your boundaries.** But you can advocate for yourself, take what action you can, and protect yourself emotionally.
- **It's okay to give up on some boundaries.** Pick your battles. Some things aren't worth the fight right now.
- **Your future self will benefit from this practice.** Every boundary you set now is preparing you to establish healthy boundaries as an adult.



## Real Talk

Setting boundaries when you live in a hoarded home is exhausting and often feels pointless.

You set a boundary. It gets violated. You set it again. It gets violated again. You feel like you're screaming into the void.

**Here's the truth: You might not win this battle right now.**

Your parent may never respect your boundaries while you live there. You may spend years fighting for basic autonomy over your own space and never fully get it.

**And you should still practice setting boundaries.**

Not because they'll always work. Not because your parent will suddenly change. But because:

- You're building skills you'll use for the rest of your life, in all aspects of your life
- You're learning what you need and how to ask for it
- You're refusing to internalize that your needs don't matter
- You're practicing self-advocacy for when you have real power
- Small wins do happen, and they matter

When you move out and have your own place, you'll know how to:

- State your needs clearly
- Enforce your boundaries
- Protect your space
- Advocate for yourself

**You're learning these skills in the hardest possible circumstances.**

That means when you're in normal circumstances—with roommates, partners, friends—you'll be really, really good at this.

Keep practicing. Keep setting boundaries even when they're violated. Keep advocating for yourself.

You're not doing it for your parent.

**You're doing it for you.**