

12

Our Boundaries

Let's Begin

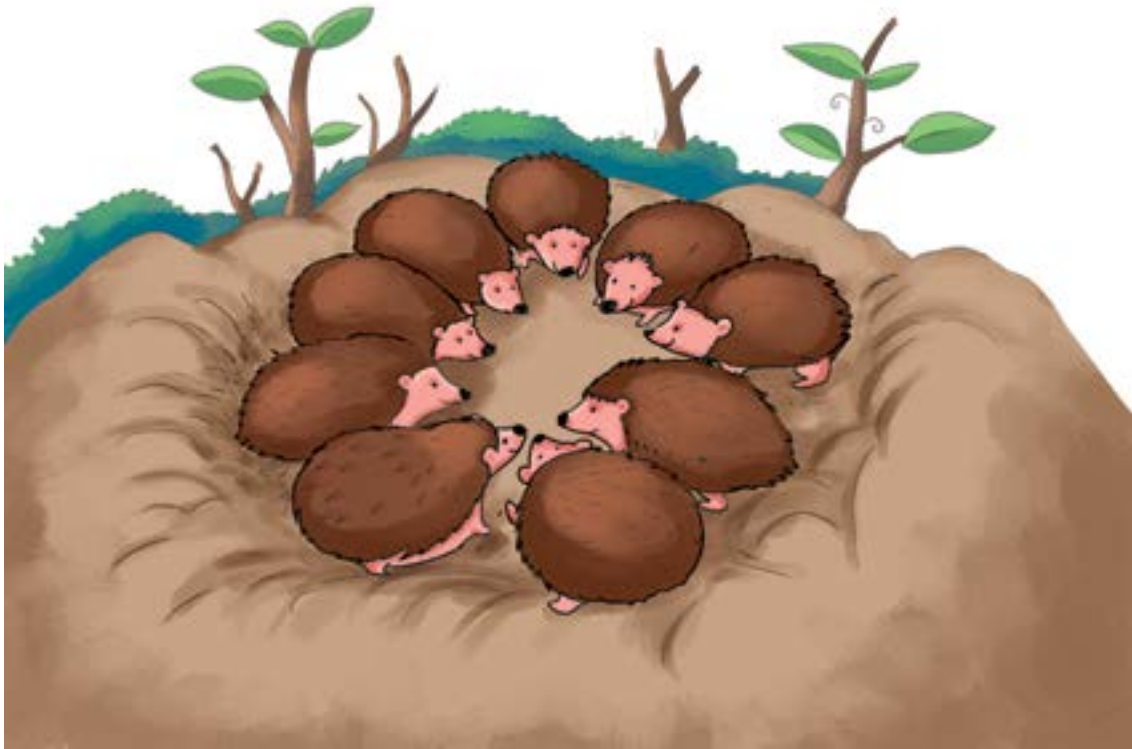
1. Are you an extrovert or an introvert?
2. Do you have many friends or a few good friends?
3. Whom do you share your thoughts, fears and ideas with?

Respect each other's private spaces and boundaries

Humans are social beings, yet it is not so easy to live in groups. We can learn a few lessons about socialising from the following animal fable of porcupines.

The porcupine is an interesting creature. It has a coat full of sharp quills to protect itself from predators. These quills remain flat against its skin most of the time, but if the porcupine senses danger, the quills immediately stand up and the creature becomes a big ball of sharp thorns.

Another interesting thing about the porcupine is that it has a peculiar similarity to human beings. And what is that? Let's read to find out.



It was an unusually harsh winter in Porcupine Land. The poor porcupines were dying of cold and didn't know what to do. They decided to put their heads together and think of a solution. To their pleasant surprise, just putting their heads together seemed to have solved their problem. They discovered that when they all remained close to each other, the warmth of their bodies kept the cold at bay.

The porcupines happily stuck together until they found themselves facing a new problem. Being so close to each other, there was a lot of unintentional pushing, shoving and nudging among them. As a result, someone's quills were always up on end. These quills in turn poked someone else, and soon many of them were injured and bleeding. A few who couldn't take it anymore walked away, but the cold got to them and they couldn't survive.

Caught between the harsh cold and the sharp quills, the porcupines quickly understood the rules they would have to abide by.

- They needed each other's warmth. So they would have to remain close to each other
- But by being too close to each other, they risked quill injuries; so they must leave enough space between them
- They had to learn to sense the right distance to keep from each other for their common good

Porcupines are simple animals, but they learn quickly. Warmth, security and peace were soon achieved in Porcupine Land. No one was cold and no one was injured.

Activity A: **Porcupines and Humans**

Discuss the following questions in pairs. Share your answers with your class.

Can the physical dilemma of the porcupines be compared with the emotional dilemma of human beings? What do you think is common between the porcupine community and human society with regard to the need for warmth and security vs the need for space and privacy?

Personal Space

Human beings are a social species. We need to live in close-knit units like families and communities and as a society as a whole. These groups mutually fulfil our

needs for physical security, emotional bonding and social connections. There is warmth and security in numbers, just like it is for porcupines. We may sometimes feel we will do well in isolation, but it is not practically possible. In so many unseen ways, human beings will always remain connected to each other. We are interdependent and bonding is a necessity for us.

Just like the porcupines, humans need their own space too. This does not mean that people are full of thorns and dangerous to get close to. It means that a person's rightful share of space extends beyond what is visible. This holds true for physical space as well as emotional and social space. Together we call these three boundaries 'personal space'. If we are not conscious of others' personal space and we happen to infringe into it, we may make them feel threatened or suffocated. Similarly, we too experience discomfort when someone violates our boundaries, don't we?

Three Types of Personal Space

As discussed above, 'personal space' is a combined term used for three different types of boundaries that every individual needs and deserves. These are: physical space, emotional space and social space. Let us spend some time understanding each of them in turn.

Physical Space

This is an easy-to-understand concept, mostly because our physical bodies are visible and tangible. We understand without being told that it's not alright to push, shove or squash someone. It is also not acceptable to touch anyone without their consent. Putting yourself in someone's breathing space also counts as a violation of physical boundaries.

Why is this boundary necessary? Firstly, using physical force on another can cause physical and emotional injury. Secondly, any kind of touch that is unwanted, however gentle it may be, is a direct threat to someone's physical and mental well-being. Being too close to another person against their will has the same effect, even if you don't actually touch them. At the very least, it can be a source of discomfort to them. No one appreciates body odour or the risk of contagious diseases.

Hence, we should respect others' physical boundaries and also protect our own.

Emotional Space

Just like the physical boundary, each of us requires an emotional space for ourselves. This is the place where we can safely keep our feelings, thoughts, beliefs, opinions, likes, dislikes and memories. All these things are very much part of who we are. We may refer to it as an 'emotional body' for better understanding. It is necessary that the sanctity, safety and health of our emotional body are maintained for our inner well-being. For example, telling someone that their traditional dressing sense is

outdated and they should wear more fashionable clothes is a breach of their emotional boundary. Their personal choice must be respected.

We ensure this by being mindful and respectful of other peoples' emotional bodies, just as we would expect them to be of ours. We do not question or ridicule anyone's beliefs or opinions. If we must disagree, we do so courteously. We also take care not to hurt anyone's self-esteem or belittle their hopes and dreams.

Many times, we fail to see other people's rights over their own emotional bodies. It is theirs to keep as they like. Even if we think we can improve upon their inner world, we must understand that it is their own journey of growth and learning. Well-meaning advice should not extend into a space that hurts their sense of self. This is their emotional boundary.

Social Space

We need social security in the same way we need physical and emotional security. Violation of social space is a source of annoyance and can sometimes cause emotional or even physical harm. What are the factors that fall in our individual social space? First and foremost, it is our privacy and dignity, next is the safety of our possessions as well as of our identity and our reputation. These are hard-earned things that we value and cherish. They give us a place of respectability in our society, which in turn gives us a sense of security and satisfaction. Exposing someone's secrets is an example of breaching their social boundary.

We must therefore respect the social space of others and define and protect our own as well.

Different Boundaries

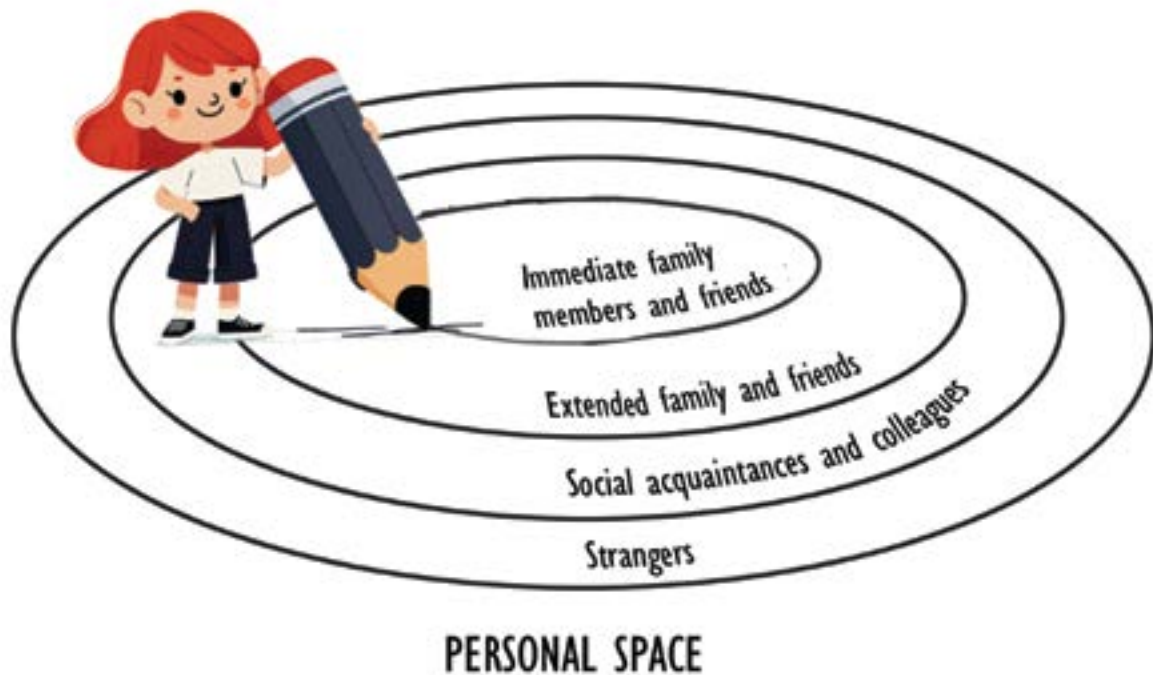
Now that we understand what personal space is, the next thing is to see how this space is different for different people in our lives or at different times.

The following factors decide how personal boundaries vary.

Relationship: Personal boundaries are less for family and friends and more for acquaintances and strangers. We need to observe this boundary according to our relationship with the other person.

Situation: How much personal space a person needs can also depend on their circumstances. For example, when someone is going through a difficult phase, they may require more social/emotional space than usual. We should be able to sense this and act accordingly.

Personality: Our personality type also has an effect on how big our bubble of personal space is. For example, introverts and extroverts have different boundaries and we should respect that difference.



Activity B: Your Boundary Fort

Write the names of 20 people in your life. Include family members as well as friends, classmates, neighbours, teachers and workers. Now draw your own boundary fort with concentric rings. You need not label the rings as given in the book. Just distribute your list of 20 people in various rings as you feel appropriate. As you classify the names, notice if you are placing them according to their relationship with you or as per how they make you feel. You may find that loving and

considerate people are in your inner circles even though they are not closely related to you. The other way around may also be true. We will discuss more of this aspect later.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Defining Your Own Personal Space

We have learnt that every individual requires their personal space. Similarly, it is also important to define and maintain your own personal boundaries. You are now old enough to be responsible for your well-being. As you stand at the threshold of adulthood, this is a crucial skill required of you to blossom into maturity. Let us look closely at how to go about defining your own personal space.

Your bubble of personal space must be small enough to allow healthy bonds and connections with other people to

form, and yet it must be large enough to allow you room to safeguard yourself against any physical or mental harm.

The following guidelines will help you establish your limits and boundaries by yourself.

Physical space: Your physical safety, dignity and comfort define the boundaries of your physical space."

Emotional space: Your set of values, type of personality and sometimes your current situation are guidelines to establish your emotional boundary.

Social space: Your own accepted code of conduct, your environment and your sensibilities define your social space.

Some additional points to consider about personal space

1. As you may have seen while doing Activity B, it is not always necessary to follow the order of priority described in the earlier illustration when setting limits." It may happen that a member of your extended family makes you feel uncomfortable. You are well within your rights to extend your space bubble further in this case. You need not feel hesitant or guilty in doing so; just politely declare and firmly maintain your boundaries.
2. Sometimes we can make errors of judgement in deciding or maintaining our boundaries. A common cause for this is a low self-esteem. A subconscious need for love and approval may lead us to loosen our boundaries, especially at this age. This is not a healthy situation and it can put us at the risk of harm. It is important to guard against this.
3. Sensing the limit of personal space of others is a skill that comes from being thoughtful. If we just assume that others are comfortable with our behaviour, without

paying attention to their discomfort, we may hurt or offend them unknowingly. So, it is always advisable to deal with others from the outermost boundary of personal space until they invite you into their closer circles.

4. Listen to your gut feeling when setting your limits or sensing others' limits. It is usually more accurate than prescribed norms on the subject.
5. Observing personal space does not equate to losing normal concern for each other. Remember the porcupines and the cold? Looking out for someone or offering emotional support is not the same as violating their personal space.

Activity C: **Sensing Boundaries**

Let us check how we fare in sensing spaces and boundaries. Take this quiz and mark your answers as any of the below responses:

- (a) violation of physical boundary
- (b) violation of emotional boundary
- (c) violation of social boundary
- (d) no violation of boundary

Boundaries Quiz

1. Your friend has posted your pictures on social media without your consent.
2. You disclose your friend's secret crush on a film star to their other friends.
3. You see your classmate sobbing in a corner and you ask them what is troubling them.
4. Your aunt gives you unsolicited recipes for home remedies to brighten your skin complexion.
5. The person behind you in a queue is standing so close to you that they are touching you.
6. You borrow your friend's bicycle without asking.
7. Your sibling calls you by your embarrassing nickname in social gatherings.
8. Your tennis coach always teaches you how to swing by holding your hand without asking you first.
9. Your friend wants to be alone after they lost their pet. You organise a surprise party to make them feel better.
10. You call and visit your friend's mother who is sick, with flowers and a card.

Let's Remember

Our personal space gives us more than just privacy and protection, it gives us room to grow and bloom. We need room to be ourselves and to work out our issues by ourselves, without too much interference from the outside world. If we learn to keep just the right space among ourselves, like the porcupines, we will find our society to be peaceful and harmonious.

A great number of problems in interpersonal relationships come from not respecting one another's personal space. And, in many cases, people are not even aware of boundaries crossed.

The quality or value that we must inculcate in order to sense personal boundaries is that of empathy or thoughtfulness. A considerate human being does not need guidelines to understand someone's need for space.

Peaceful individuals create a peaceful world. This is the wisdom we need to learn from the porcupines.

My Space

What I liked most about this lesson...

.....
.....

I learnt that

.....
.....



Engage

with Family

- 1. Discuss your boundary diagram with your parents/family members/guardians and explain to them the reasons for your classification.*
- 2. Enable your family members, especially siblings/cousins, to create boundary forts for themselves. You can cross-reference your boundary forts with theirs to identify similarities and differences.*