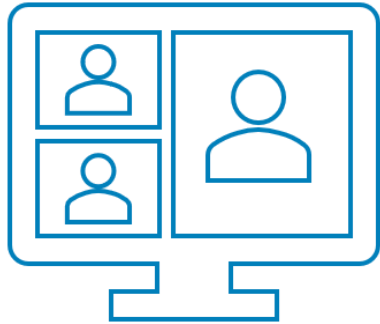




Navigating Boundaries with Confidence and Care

INTRODUCTIONS

Today's Facilitators



PAL Participants

Please introduce yourself in the **chat**:

- Your **NAME**
- **Shelter where you volunteer**

GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING

We hope you'll leave this session prepared to ...

- Recognize and maintain healthy boundaries with children in Playspace
- Respond confidently to challenging or unclear situations
- Model respectful, safe interactions that support children's well-being
- Ask questions and seek support whenever you're unsure

Shared Practices



Safety First

- *We create spaces where children feel physically and emotionally safe.*

Consistency & Predictability

- *We offer consistent schedules, clear communication, and stable relationships.*

Collaboration & Shared Ownership

- *Shelter staff, Horizons staff, and PALs work together to build and maintain healing environments.*

Empathy & Understanding

- *We approach children & families with empathy, recognizing that behaviors often reflect traumatic experiences.*

Empowerment & Voice

- *We respect the voices and choices of children & families whenever possible to promote autonomy and self-confidence. This is critical for children impacted by trauma.*

Cultural Humility & Respect

- *We honor the diverse backgrounds & strengths of the children & families we serve.*

Why Boundaries Matter



Health Boundaries are guidelines and limits designed to foster an environment of safety and well-being.

Healthy Boundaries:

- Builds confidence and a sense of control
- Create a safe and supportive environment
- Helps children understand respect personal space
- Protects both children and volunteers
- Helps establish trust and professionalism
- Builds consistent and predictable relationships



What this looks like in the Playspace



As a Playspace volunteer, you're here to:

Respect each child's space and comfort

Model safe and appropriate physical boundaries — this helps all children feel secure and in control of their own bodies.

Keep all play within the shift and space

Stay present during your scheduled shift and keep your support within the designated Playspace area. This helps create predictability and respect for their home.

Support emotions without trying to fix them

Be a calming presence. You can acknowledge their feelings without solving their problems — and that's enough.

By showing up with warmth, respect, and consistency, you help children feel safe and in control — and that's where emotional security and trust begin.



Your Role as a Volunteer



As a Playspace volunteer, you are not expected to be a teacher, therapist, or behavior specialist. You are here to:

- Model safe and respectful interactions
- Maintain consistent boundaries
- Prioritize play-based support, not emotional dependency
- Report any concerns or disclosures to shelter staff and your Playspace specialist.

This is how children learn what safe relationships feel like and that's the foundation for all other learning.



Reason We Emphasize Boundaries



Many children in shelter have experienced trauma.

Physical closeness may feel confusing, overwhelming, or unsafe even if they initiate it.

Respecting boundaries around when, where, and how children engage with others, as well as honoring their emotional space, helps create a consistent and safe environment.

Consistency in boundaries helps all children feel protected and respected.

In Playspace, we model consistency, respect, and predictability—helping children learn what safe relationships look like.



Try These Strategies



Every moment of play is a chance to model safe, respectful boundaries. No hugs. No lap-sitting. No rough play. No carrying children. No contact outside the Playspace.

What you can do	Why it helps
Gently redirect physical play: <i>I can't let you climb on me. Let's find another fun game!</i>	Models safe, respectful boundaries
Use non-contact greetings: waves, high fives, thumbs-up	Builds connections while keeping interactions safe
Reflect feelings: <i>"It looks like you're full of energy! Let's use it in a safe way."</i>	Helps children feel seen and guides appropriate play
Acknowledge feelings during transitions: <i>"It's hard to stop when you're having fun. We'll play again next time."</i>	Models emotional regulation without shaming
Listen when children share: <i>"That sounds really hard. Thank you for telling me."</i>	Offers empathy while maintaining professional boundaries

You don't have to do it perfectly—just be consistent, kind, and clear. That's what helps every child feel safe, valued, and empowered in the Playspace.

Scenario: Physical Boundaries



Child Age: 4 years old

What Happens:

A child starts climbing on your back and pulling your arms. Others begin to join in and treat it like a game.

What Not to Do:

The PAL laughs and says, "Alright, I'm what we are climbing today!" Other kids quickly join in, piling on and roughhousing. The PAL continues playing along, even though it starts to feel overwhelming.

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Can reinforce unsafe or inappropriate physical boundaries.
- Blurs the line between roles.
- Doesn't promote safety.
- Makes it harder to enforce boundaries later.

A Better Way:

Stay calm. Gently remove the child and say, *"I need my space, but let's find another game to play!"*

Acknowledge their energy: *"You've got so much energy – I love that! Let's use it in a safe and fun way."*

Offer alternatives: *"Let's play tag instead."* or *"Want to show me your dance moves?"*

Repeat the boundary if needed.

Why This Works:

Models healthy boundaries and respectful communication

Promotes safety and predictability

Reinforces bodily autonomy and personal space

Skills Supported:

- Respect for other's personal space
- Social Communication and Self Awareness

Physical contact beyond high fives, waves, or side-by-side play is not allowed. This is not a flexible boundary to protect everyone.

Scenario: Time and Place Boundaries



Child Age: 3 years old

What Happens:

The end of the play shift has arrived, and everyone is beginning to clean up. A child is still deeply engaged in play and says,

"I don't want to go! Can I stay just a little longer? Please?"

Their caregiver is at the door, waiting to leave, and the child is beginning to get upset.

What Not to Do:

A volunteer says "Sure! You can stay for a few more minutes!"

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Undermines structure and caregiver authority
- Disrupts routines and predictability.

A Better Way:

Acknowledge their feelings: *"It looks like you're having a really great time—it can be hard to stop when you're having fun."*

Communicate the limit: *"Playtime is all done for today. It's time to go with your grown-up now."*

Offer predictability and reassurance:

"I'll be here again soon, and we can play more then! Do you want to think about what you'll play next time?"

Use transitional countdown or activities to help children shift gears more smoothly.

Why This Works:

Upholds consistency and predictability

Support's ability to manage transitions

Keeps caregiver-child's relationship primary

Skills Supported:

- Emotional regulation around limits
- Building trust through consistency

Scenario: Emotional Boundaries



Child Age: 8 years old

What Happens:

A child shares they feel lonely and cry at night. They miss their old home.

What Not to Do:

A PAL says, "I know how you feel. When I was little, my family moved a lot too. But things got better, and I promise they will for you too. Maybe you'll get to go home soon."

Why This Doesn't Help:

- Creates emotional dependency.
- Shifted the focus away from the child.
- Blurs the line between roles.
- Can lead to false hope or confusion.
- Risks retraumatizing or mismanaging the child's needs.

A Better Way:

Stay calm and present. Actively listen to the child.

Acknowledge their feelings: *"That sounds really tough. I'm so glad you trusted me enough to share."*

Report to shelter staff: Share any disclosures or concerns that are alarming – staff are trained to respond

• **Take care of yourself:** If you feel emotionally affected, step away to take a breath. Self-care helps you keep showing up in a grounded, caring way.

Why This Works:

Validates the child's feelings without overstepping.

Keeps the focus on play-based support.

Ensures the child gets appropriate care.

Skills Supported:

- Emotional awareness
- Self regulation
- Empathy and Trust

Tip Sheet



TIP SHEET

Navigating Boundaries with Confidence and Care



Why Boundaries Matter

Boundaries help create a Playspace where children feel safe, respected, and in control of their experiences. They are an essential part of trauma-informed experience in the Playspace.

Boundaries help children learn to:

- Trust that adults will keep them safe
- Understand and respect personal space
- Build confidence and a sense of control
- Experience consistent and predictable relationships

Maintaining clear boundaries is part of every volunteer's role.

What This Looks Like in the Playspace

In a Playspace, boundaries are supported when volunteers:

- Respect personal space — no hugging, carrying, lap-sitting for children over the age of 2.
- No rough play, wrestling or tickling
- Use non-contact greetings (high fives, waves, smiles, fist pumps or happy dance)
- Redirect physical play that crosses boundaries
- Keep interactions within scheduled shift times and inside the Playspace
- Offer empathy without giving advice or trying to solve problems
- Keep personal beliefs and experiences private

Even small, consistent boundary-setting moments help children feel safe and respected.

1

TIP SHEET

Navigating Boundaries with Confidence and Care



Your Role as a PAL

As a Playspace volunteer, you are here to:

- Create a calm, joyful space where children can play safely
- Model respect for personal space and autonomy
- Support consistent boundaries
- Protect your own well-being and emotional boundaries

Physical contact beyond high fives, waves, or side-by-side play is not allowed. This is not flexible—boundaries protect everyone.

Why We Don't Make Exceptions

You might notice that we do not allow hugging or rough play, even if a child seems to want it. Here's why:

- Many children in shelter have experienced trauma.
- Physical closeness may feel confusing, overwhelming, or unsafe even if they initiate it.
- Consistency in boundaries helps all children feel protected and respected.
- Safe boundaries also protect volunteers and the integrity of the program.

Instead of making exceptions, we model consistency, respect, and predictability—helping children learn what safe relationships look like.

2

TRY IT YOURSELF

Navigating Boundaries with Confidence and Care



Every moment of play is a chance to model safe, respectful boundaries.

No hugs. No lap-sitting. No rough play. No carrying children. No contact outside the Playspace.

WHAT YOU CAN DO	WHY IT HELPS
Gently redirect physical play: "I can't let you climb on me. Let's find another fun game!"	Models safe, respectful boundaries
Use non-contact greetings: waves, high fives, thumbs-up	Builds connection while keeping interactions safe
Reflect feelings: "It looks like you're full of energy! Let's use it in a safe way."	Helps children feel seen and guides appropriate play
Acknowledge feelings during transitions: "It's hard to stop when you're having fun. We'll play again next time."	Supports emotional regulation and predictability
Listen calmly when children share: "That sounds really hard. Thank you for telling me."	Offers empathy while maintaining professional boundaries
Redirect questions about personal beliefs: "Everyone believes different things — and that's okay."	Maintains inclusive, child-centered focus

You don't have to do it perfectly—just be consistent, kind, and clear. That's what helps every child feel safe, valued, and empowered in the Playspace.

3

PAL Resource Page



PROGRAMS > PAL RESOURCES

PAL RESOURCES

The Playspace program is made possible by the 700 dedicated PALs across Massachusetts who bring kindness, play experiences, and moments of joy to children living in shelter every week! Horizons staff is committed to the success of the volunteers, the program, and the families we serve. Ensuring volunteers feel prepared and confident is important to us and your feedback is welcome. Email us at palsupport@horizonschildren.org if you have suggestions or feedback.

Tip Sheets

The following resources and tip sheets are designed to empower you with the tools and knowledge needed to support the children served in Playspace. For more in depth information, attend one of our ongoing training sessions!

Playspace Policies

Activity Ideas

Building Healthy Relationships

Language Support

Managing Behaviors

Outdoor Playspace

- [Policies and Procedures](#)
- [Attire Guidelines](#)
- [Incident Reporting Guide](#)
- [Incident Report Form](#)
- [Non-Permitted Items & Materials](#)
- [Communication Guide](#)

Final Thoughts



Every moment of play is a chance to nurture connection, confidence, and healing. You don't have to do it perfectly just be present, kind, and open. That's what makes the Playspace so powerful.

