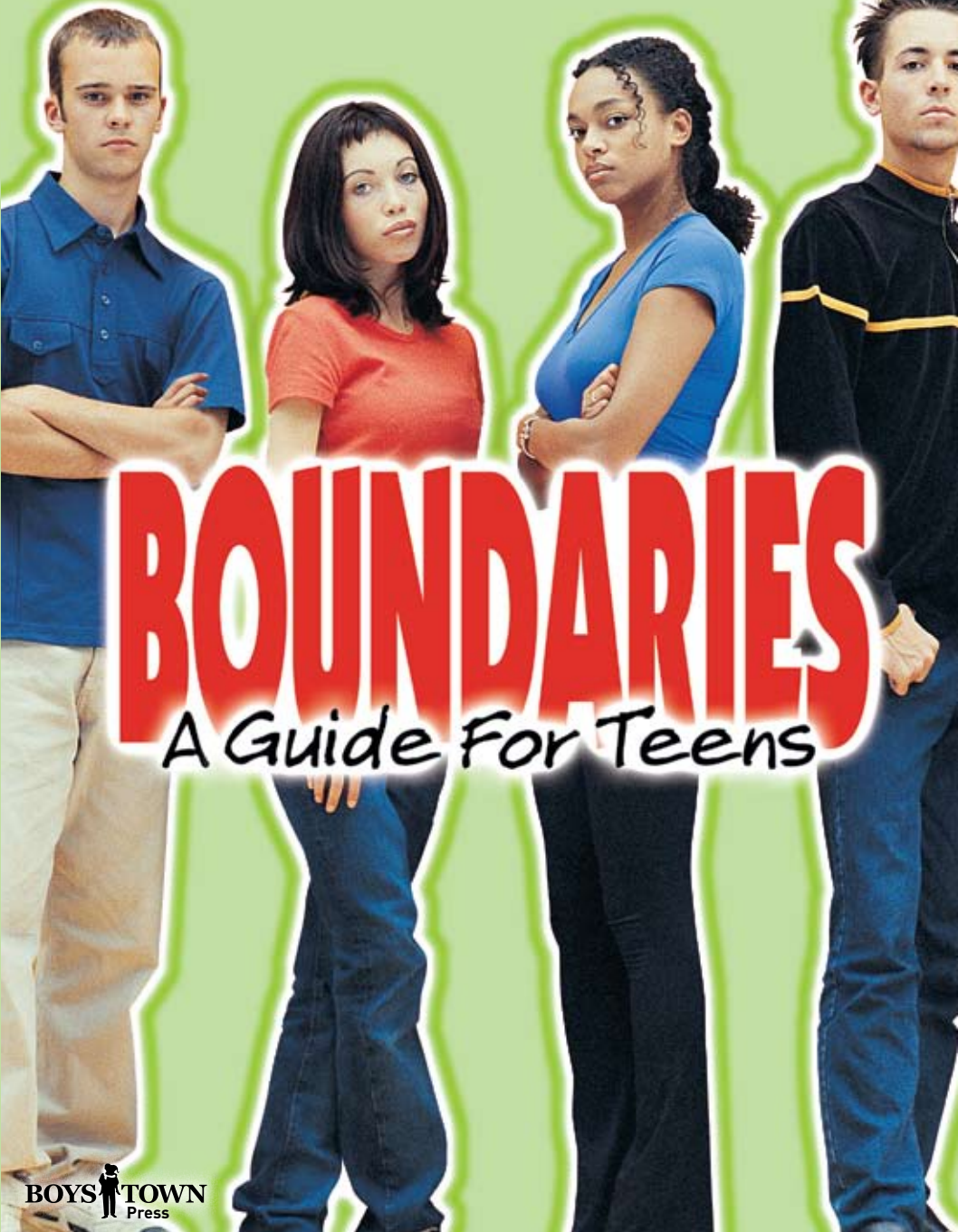


VAL J. PETER & TOM DOWD



# BOUNDARIES

*A Guide For Teens*

BOYS TOWN  
Press

*How to build relationships that protect your personal space and respect your feelings*

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## **What Are Boundaries?**

A boundary is the personal space that you keep between yourself and others. It defines “where I end and you begin.” Boundaries work in two ways: They allow things in, and they keep things out. Boundaries are important because they define areas of privacy.

Good boundaries help you feel secure and worthwhile. When someone crosses the boundaries you have set, your mind and body tell you that the person has gone too far, and you start to feel uncomfortable.

Initially, parents help you begin setting your boundaries. Later, you take a more active role in setting your boundaries.

## **Types of Boundaries**

**Physical/Sexual** – These boundaries protect your body. You decide who can touch you, how they can touch you, and where. These boundaries help you answer questions such as “Do I shake hands or give a hug?” Physical boundaries also protect private areas of the body.

**Emotional/Spiritual** – These boundaries protect your private thoughts and emotions. You decide what feelings you will or will not share with others. You share secret thoughts and some of your deepest feelings only with certain family members and friends.



# Teresa's Story

Teresa always worried about how other people felt. She had been a “people pleaser” since she was a little girl. Now that she was older, she often thought of becoming a nurse.

Teresa first met Sam in the guidance counselor’s office. She was switching classes to acquire a study hall at the end of the day. His family had just moved from New York, and he and the counselor were arranging his class schedule. Teresa and Sam finished working on their schedules at the same time. She asked him what he thought of the town and if he had any brothers and sisters, and they made the usual small talk for about five minutes.

As it turned out, they were in two of the same classes. Sam was talkative and asked questions all the time. They started eating lunch and studying for tests together. He talked about what it was like growing up in New York City, about his screwed-up family and the times he saw his dad beat his mom. These things disturbed Teresa, and she felt so sorry for him that she almost cried.

After the first few weeks of school, Sam started passing notes to Teresa after class. Soon the notes started to bother Teresa. They were too personal, and she noticed that Sam was becoming a little too friendly when they were talking. She had made it very clear that friendship was the only thing on her mind and that she didn't want to date Sam. But that didn't stop Sam from continually asking personal questions: What did she wear to bed – a nightgown or pajamas? What did she think was sexy about the guys she knew? What kinds of things “turned her on”?

Teresa was in a bind. She didn't want to hurt Sam's feelings because she knew he was really sensitive. But she hated those questions, and they made her uncomfortable. She tried to tell Sam in a nice way to stop it, but he just didn't get the hint. She finally decided that she had to tell him to quit asking her such personal questions.

The next day when they were eating lunch together, Sam began asking questions again. Teresa thought this was the perfect time to tell him what she was feeling. She said, “You know Sam, we’ve done a lot of stuff together...” He interrupted her: “You’re gonna dump me, aren’t you?” He had a hurt look on his face that upset her. She took a deep breath and said, “Well, no, not really. I just thought that some of the things you’ve been talking about lately have made me kind of uncomfortable.”

Whew. She had said it. Teresa had always had trouble saying anything that she thought might hurt someone. She usually hedged instead of telling someone the straight truth. Sam wrinkled his face quizzically and said, “Like what?” Teresa told him that she didn’t like talking about personal and private things, and then she gave him some examples. She said she didn’t like being asked questions about sex, what she wore to bed and things like that.

He answered, “You know you like it, Teresa. I will give you whatever you want. You need me. Trust me. It will be fun.”

Teresa was shocked. She realized that she should have been up front with Sam from the

beginning. She realized that she needed to work on setting limits and letting people know exactly what those limits were. And it was clear that Sam knew exactly what he was doing. He had grown up in a dysfunctional family where such language was the way a man controlled a woman. Embarrassing a girl gave him a sense of power. His dad did it to his mom all the time.

Teresa and Sam broke up that day. And Teresa is happy they did. It was hard, but Teresa feels proud that she stood up for herself. She also gained respect from her classmates.

## **You Can Say ‘Stop’**

If you recognized that Sam was saying things that offended or embarrassed Teresa, good for you. You have an accurate picture of what personal boundaries are. You know Sam’s own boundaries were full of holes, so full that he was overwhelming Teresa. And if you knew that Teresa should have said something earlier, you understand how important it is to let people know what your boundaries are.

It’s not impolite or unreasonable to say “stop” whenever someone makes you feel uncomfortable or tries to make you do something that is wrong. It is important to realize that someone else’s boundary violations are not your fault. If a violator will not stop, tell someone who can help you. Keep telling until the problem is taken care of.

When aggressive people don’t have clear boundaries, they end up hurting others. When someone crosses a boundary line you have set, you should be uneasy. Think of your own experiences. Has a stranger ever stood so close to you that you were nervous? Has anyone ever touched you in a way that was “overly friendly”? Did someone you didn’t know very well ever

sneak up behind you and pinch or grab you or start rubbing your shoulders? Has anyone ever asked you personal questions that embarrassed or upset you?

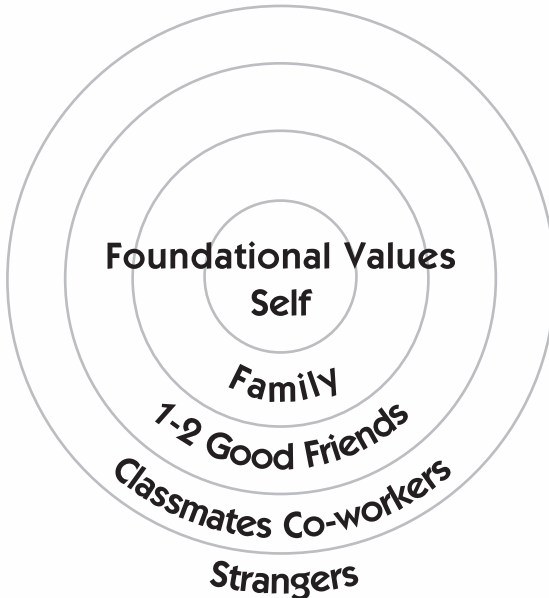
Those are all boundary issues. Those people were just “too close for comfort.”



# Your Boundary Wheel

It's important for people to know what you stand for. Your foundational values are the things that are really valuable and worthwhile to you in your heart of hearts and in your family. They are values that define your character, such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

To better understand your boundaries, imagine a series of circles forming a wheel around you. These circles can help you picture how close you will let someone get to you physically and how much emotional sharing you will do with this person.



Everyone you encounter fits somewhere along your boundary wheel. Family and good friends are within the innermost circles. Casual acquaintances, classmates and co-workers are farther out, while strangers are the farthest away from you.

*Where do the various people in your life fit within your boundary wheel? Write their names in the appropriate circles.*

