Building Strong Families
Provide Structure With Rules

During the school years, children begin to spend more time away from parents, and parents depend more on rules to help guide their children's behavior. Rules are especially important for children who stay alone. It is through these rules that parents set expectations, ensure home safety, and provide a daily structure for their children.

Most families establish some rules for children, but the results aren't always what the parents desire. Listed below are some guidelines that may help you establish effective rules for your children.

1. **Make reasonable rules.** When a rule requires behavior that is beyond the capability of the child, it is unlikely to be followed. Expecting a 10-year-old to clean the entire house while alone is unreasonable and will most likely lead to resentment and frustration. However, asking the same child to dust and vacuum his/her room may represent a reasonable request that is more likely to be followed.

2. **State rules clearly and specifically.** In order to follow a rule, children must first understand what is required by the rule. They must understand exactly what is to be done and when it should be done. *Don't eat a snack too soon before dinner, and no junk food allowed.* This statement does not provide the child with enough information to do what parents really expect.

   This statement is more likely to result in the desired behavior: *Choose snacks from the list posted on the refrigerator and eat before 4:00.*

   This rule allows the child some choice (especially if the child helps choose the allowed snacks) and clearly specifies when the event should occur.

   The following statement is also too vague: *Do the dishes.*

   Instead use a statement such as: *Wash, dry and put away the breakfast dishes by 5:00.*
3. **Children should understand the reason behind the rules.** Good rules have good reasons. If there is not a good reason, eliminate the rule. Often parents are aware of the reasons behind rules and assume the children also understand. However, children may not be aware of their parents' thoughts and may see the rule as nothing more than an arbitrary whim.

Helping children understand the reason for a rule may eliminate some of their opposition to it. In addition, children who are given reasons begin to set up a system of beliefs about what is right and wrong. They use these beliefs to make their own decisions about issues rather than blindly follow their peers.

4. **Consequences for following or not following rules should be clear and immediate.** Positive consequences, in which children are allowed something desirable for following the rule, are often effective. *After you finish your homework you may watch TV for one-half hour.*

The statement above tells your child what you expect and gives him or her an incentive for completing the task.

Closely tie negative consequences to the situation, and make sure they occur soon after the rule is broken. For example, a child who does not clean up after a snack may have to wash and dry the dinner dishes that night rather than just wash them.

5. **Enforce the rules consistently.** Check each day to be sure your children follow rules. This is especially important when the rules are first developed.

Children will live up to reasonable expectations. If you expect and check for compliance, you are more likely to get it. Most children will test you in the beginning but will quickly stop when they realize you are serious about living by rules.

When your children break rules, don't let them get by one time and punish them the next. This inconsistency makes children angry and confused. If you find it difficult to enforce the rules consistently, you have too many rules. It is better to follow a few rules consistently rather than have a long list of unenforced rules. Add new rules later after the family masters existing ones.
6. **Involve your children in establishing the rules.** Children will more likely follow rules they helped develop. They should also help establish consequences wherever possible. Including children in the discussions will not always be easy.

When a disagreement arises, listen carefully to your children's point of view. Try to understand what exactly they object to before responding. Look for ways to compromise. If your children object to staying inside when home alone, let them go outside for one-half hour before dinner after you arrive home. This will help them accept the rule more easily.

Negotiations will often take time. If no progress is being made in a family meeting, stop and set a time for another session. This will allow tempers to cool and will give everyone time to think of new solutions.

7. **Write down and post the agreed-upon rules.** This will help children remember the rules and will eliminate arguments about what the rules actually were if a problem arises. Call a family meeting periodically to go over rules. Children and situations change. Modify rules to take into account these changes.

Establishing effective rules for self-care is an important first step in assuring that your children have a positive experience when alone. The rules that you and your children establish will help give them a safe and stimulating environment.

Remember: The ability or readiness of your child to stay alone is a continuum or sequence of progress beginning at a very early age. The first time you leave your baby alone in a room, the first time your pre-schooler goes out to the yard alone, the first time your grade school age child walks down the block to a friend's house are all examples of the progress made toward the ability to stay at home alone.

The rules and structure that you establish with each sequence of progress is based on the age and maturity of the child. They help establish expectations, ensure safety, and provide structure and a sense of security.

Adapted from material developed by Christine M. Todd, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Child and Family Development, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.