Building Strong Families

Provide Structure With Rules

Children in school spend more time away from parents, so parents depend more on rules to help guide their children's behavior. Rules are especially important for children who stay alone. Parents use rules to tell children what they expect, to keep them safe, and to give children structure each day.

Most families set up some rules for children, but the results aren't always what the parents want. Here are some guidelines for setting up helpful rules for your children.

1. **Make reasonable rules.** If a rule calls for behavior the child isn’t able to do, it probably won’t be followed. Asking a 10-year-old to clean the whole house while alone is unreasonable; it will likely make the child frustrated and angry. However, asking the same child to dust and vacuum his/her room is more reasonable. The child can do this.

2. **State rules clearly and give details.** To follow a rule, children must first understand what the rule means. They must understand exactly what is to be done and when. “Don't eat a snack too soon before dinner, and no junk food allowed.” This statement does not give the child enough details to do what parents expect.

   This statement is more likely to get results: “Choose snacks from the list posted on the refrigerator, and eat before 4:00.” This rule gives the child some choice (especially if he/she helps choose the snacks) and clearly tells when the event should happen.

   This rule is also unclear: “Do the dishes.”

   Instead, say something like this: “Wash, dry, and put away the breakfast dishes by 5:00.”
3. **Help children understand the reasons behind the rules.** Good rules have good reasons. If there is not a good reason, get rid of the rule. Often parents know the reasons for rules and think that the children also understand. However, children may not know their parents' thoughts. They may see the rule as something parents have decided on suddenly for no reason.

When you help children understand the reasons for a rule, they probably will not fight the rule. Also, you are helping children set up a system of beliefs about what is right and wrong. Later, they can use these beliefs to decide what is right, rather than just doing what their friends want.

4. **Tell children the consequences for following or not following rules. Then follow through with the consequences quickly.** Consequences can be positive or negative.

Positive consequences are often very helpful. With positive consequences, children get something that they want for following the rule. For example: “*After you finish your homework, you may watch TV for a half hour.*” This statement tells your child what you expect. It also gives him or her a reward for finishing the task.

With negative consequences, children get something that they don’t want for not following a rule. Make sure negative consequences happen 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 every time.** Check each day to be sure your children follow rules. This is especially important when you first set up the rules.

If rules are reasonable, children will usually live up to what you expect. If you expect the best and check to see that they follow rules, children are likely to follow them. Most children will test you in the
beginning to see if you enforce rules. But they will stop testing you soon 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. Enforcing rules only some of the time makes children angry and confused. If it is hard for you to enforce the rules every time, you may have too many rules. It is better to enforce a few rules all the time than to have many rules that you don’t enforce. Add new rules later when children are following the rules you have.

6. **Let your children help set up the rules.** Children are more likely to follow rules if they help set them up. If possible, let children help decide on the consequences for following or not following rules.

It is not always easy to talk about rules with children. If they disagree with you, listen carefully to them. Try to understand how they feel and what they disagree with before you answer them. Then look for ways to compromise. For example, if they don’t want to stay inside when they are home alone, let them go outside for a half hour before dinner after you arrive home. This compromise will help them agree to the rule.

Often it takes time for parents and children to decide on rules. If you talk about rules in a family meeting and can’t agree, stop and set a time for another meeting. At a later meeting, people may not feel as angry. And they may have had time to think of ways to solve the problems.

7. **Write down the rules you agree on. Then put them up where everyone can see them.** This will help children remember the rules. It will also end arguments about what the rules are if problems come up. Because children and situations can change, call a family meeting from time to time to go over the rules. You may need to change the rules to fit the changes.
Setting up helpful rules for self-care is an important first step in making sure that your children do well when alone. The rules that you and your children set up will help keep them safe and happy.

Remember: Children learn the skills to stay alone from many experiences, starting at a very early age. The first time you leave your baby alone in a room, the first time your pre-schooler goes out in the yard alone, and the first time your grade-school-age child walks down the block are all examples of learning experiences. These experiences help children become more and more able to be on their own.

You will set up the rules and structure that your child needs, based on how mature and how old your child is. The structure and rules tell your child what to expect and help him/her feel safe and secure.

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