

Rules for Rules

Ten top rules for making sure that the house rules you set for your children work to make your home a happier place to live

By Chris Barnardo

Rules are a set of guidelines. When used correctly and fairly, they act as a framework within which children feel confident and know what is expected of them. Regardless of whether you make up house rules or not, every member of the household will have their own set of

rules that they follow, which they have worked out from their experience of what they do and the various outcomes. Working out and setting some explicit rules can help everyone know what is expected of them and help mould your children's own personal rule making

system.

Choose and enforce the right rules and they will become engrained in the family practices, eventually transforming into routines and then family traditions.

So here are our top ten rules for making rules:.

Make it clear what the house rules are

Rules are a set of guidelines; they help everyone know what is expected of them, so make sure that everyone knows what they are. If necessary this might involve writing them out on a sheet of paper so that they can be put up on the fridge or kitchen notice board.

Don't have too many rules

Our lives are constrained by rules at every step. Children are already learning that there are rules for just about everything they do. Don't let your adult frustrations about your life being governed by rules overflow into your own rule making. Focus on health and safety as a priority, and only develop and use rules for your children to keep them safe, and that help everyone get on and be happy together.

Make sure the rules have a reason

Discipline is much easier to maintain and enforce if your children know why they have follow a particular rule and the reason is something that they can understand. It may not be possible to explain all the reasons why doing what you say is important, but always try to give a valid reason when you impose a rule. Thinking through the reasons for imposing certain rules in the home can help you work out why you want your children to do certain things and behave in certain ways, and can help you see if what you are asking of them is reasonable, or expecting too much.

Work out what the consequences of breaking the rules are beforehand

Working out the consequences in advance will help you remain consistent and allow you to decide which rules are important. The consequence of breaking the rule should always be linked to the rule in question. Breaking a rule should either incur either a natural consequence or a logical consequence (or in some cases both).

Natural consequences are the results of a behaviour, over which we have no control, or that happen automatically, such as; if you pick up a hot pot, you burn your hand, or; if you won't eat your dinner, you get hungry. Logical consequences are outcomes contrived by the rule maker as a penalty for breaking the rule, or as a reward for following the rule, such as; if you don't put your shoes away in the cupboard, you have to put everyone else's shoes away for a day, or; if you do your homework each night for a week, you'll get double your pocket money.

Natural consequences are powerful ways of teaching us how to behave, but in some cases are not appropriate because the natural consequence is too dangerous to allow to happen (i.e. if you run into the road without looking you will get run over), or are too far away to be a deterrent (i.e. if you smoke, you will die prematurely). When natural consequences are not appropriate, logical consequences should be used, but they need to be just and fair and clearly linked to the rule breaking if they are to have any effect.

Allow children to participate in the setting of rules and the consequences of breaking them

The ability to tolerate and follow rules is considerably improved if the child has some control over setting the rules and the sanctions or consequences for non-compliance. In business they talk about “buy-in”, this refers to the degree to which we feel a willing part of the system. Discussing the rules and working with your child to set them, will make the whole process much more likely to succeed, as it gives the children an insight into why the rules you are setting out are important, and gives them a feeling of ownership over the rules.

Where the rules differ between dad’s house and mum’s house, explain why

Where possible, support the rules at the children’s other home. If you have problems with the rules at the other house, take them up with your ex-partner and not by conspiratorially undermining your ex-partner’s efforts at discipline. Understand that your ex-partner has a different set of circumstances to you, and therefore their rules will differ. Where possible coordinate basic rules between the two homes.

Where there are differences between the rules, explain to the children why there are differences. For example, bed time might be later at daddy’s house because he only sees the children once a week or at weekends and wants to spend a little more time with them; explaining this to the children, and in some cases to your ex-partner, will make it easier on everyone.

Don’t be a rule breaker yourself

Children learn by example. Don’t show them that it’s OK for you to break “rules”. Drinking and driving, flagrantly cheating, parking on yellow lines and then making up a false excuse to get out of the parking ticket, or speeding in the car, all help build up your children’s idea of what rules are, and your attitude towards them.

Once you have agreed rules in the house, obey the same rules as everyone else. All house rules must be for everybody unless there are good and clear reasons why different rules should apply to different members of the household.

Be flexible when the situation demands it

Of course you should only break the rules you have agreed, when there are clear reasons to do so, otherwise the rules become meaningless. However, depending on what the rules are, there is a time and place to be flexible. This can be seen as a treat, i.e. in the case of staying up past bedtime to watch a special film or on a birthday, or at the weekend, or as a necessity such as not waking the children up fully to clean their teeth before bed, if they have fallen asleep in the car on the way home at night for example.

Don’t lose your temper when the kids break a rule

Calmly take your child to one side and follow through with the consequence. Shouting, smacking and repeatedly saying no are not as effective as just plainly following through with the agreed consequences.

If you regularly shout and get angry when your children break the rules, you are not teaching your children to behave better, you are only teaching them bad lessons about how you are failing in your attempts to control other people (specifically them). Over even a moderate period, it can be very damaging for them, but whether it upsets them or not, they very quickly learn how to tolerate the outbursts and just accept them as part of what they have to put up with as the child of an angry parent.

Always follow through with the consequence

Once you have set the consequences of rule breaking, you must follow through. If you only enforce the rules when you feel like it, then not only is that very confusing for the child to start with, but it teaches them a new set of unwritten rules about when the rules apply. Kids are very quick to pick up on inconsistencies, and not following through with the consequences that you all agreed teaches your children that your rules are more about your mood than the original reason for setting them, and as a result they learn how to dodge them or ignore them completely.

One good way to maintain rules is to make sure that they aren’t too prescriptive to start with. A rule that says ‘you must practise your piano pieces every day before tea so that they sound nice’ is easier to enforce, easier to be flexible with and less likely to become a drudge, than one that says ‘you must practise the piano for 20 minutes each day’.