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SKILLS FOR ENFORCING RULES AND LIMITS CONSISTENTLY

In addition to communicating acceptance to your child, it is equally important to create standards, rules and limits which convey your values and which help focus your child on becoming the kind of young adult you will one day be proud of. You want your child to develop character in all of their relationships and in all of the work they do. Character is what they do whether anyone is looking or not. Character patterns and values persist for a lifetime, despite changing roles and life circumstances. You help shape children's character by creating standards, rules and limits. But how do you go about setting, communicating and enforcing these standards, rules and limits?

Setting Standards, Rules and Limits

At first it sounds easy to just set standards, rules and limits. But upon reflection, it gets a bit more difficult. How do you pick a standard? Should you use the same rules your parents used? Should you do what your neighbors do with their kids? What about using your older sister as your guide? Should you let your spouse make all the decisions related to rules since he seemed to have turned out ok? Is there a book which tells you what universal good standards, rules and limits should be?

Here is my answer: **set standards, rules and limits which reflect and manifest your values.** Period. If you value family time, set rules which support that value, like family dinner is family time, not texting time. If you value community altruism, then a standard might be everyone joins in once a week or once a month at a soup kitchen. If you value family teamwork, then a family rule

would be everyone should pitch in with clean-up after dinner. If you value conscientiousness in homework accomplishment, then homework takes precedence over screen time.

Sorting out what you value and distinguishing what is truly yours and what is a rote carry-over from your past is hard work. Do you value extended family get-togethers for weekly barbecues, or are you simply avoiding criticism for not attending? Do you go to church because this is your wisest expression of your spiritual life, or do you make yourself and your kids go so grandma and grandpa don't get mad?

But once you are clear on your values, translate them into a few well-chosen rules and limits. After obtaining your spouse's buy-in, be very clear about these rules and limits with your kids.

Communicate Your Standards, Rules, and Limits by using Values Language

What do I mean by "Values Language?" I mean **explain to your children what the rules are and simultaneously explain that these rules are expressions of what you value.** By "value," I mean what is most important to you in life. If you take a moment, you will be able to answer the question, *"What kind of family do I most want to create and live in?"* You will also be able to answer the question, *"What kind of children do I want to develop so they are prepared to live a life I will admire?"*

For example, communicate your values to your children at a family meeting or at dinner time like this: *"Hey, guys. Dad and I have been talking about the kind of family we want to have, and that family teamwork and mutual respect are two of our most important values."* Then, transition into a discussion of the standards, rules and limits which are the natural expression of those values. *"From now on, we will all be helping with dinner preparation or dinner clean up. I will prepare*

dinner. Dad will clean up. You guys will each decide whether you want to be on the preparation crew or the clean-up crew.”

After inviting reactions and making time for any discussion your children may wish to have about what you have said, you may then move on to the next part of the conversation. *“As for respect, from now on if anyone in the family insults another family member, they will be dismissed from the dinner table and will lose TV for the rest of the day and night. These rules apply to me and dad, not just you guys. Anyone want to share anything or ask anything?”* However, I would not recommend sharing more than two standards or rules or limits at any single time.

Rules and limits can be set for just one individual as well as for the entire family. However, it is useful to make sure you connect the individual rule with a solid, benign reason for imposing the rule. For example, *“Charlie, your teacher called me today and told me your grades have slipped quite a lot. Remember I cautioned you that devoting so much time to computer games with your friends might mess up your studies. It looks like that happened. From now on, computer games are not allowed after dinner time. That is time during which I expect you to study, read and get ready for sleep. I know you are smart enough to do well and I know we both care about your doing your best.”*

If Charlie does not care about doing well, then you will have to explain to him why you care. *“Charlie, right now schoolwork seems irrelevant to you and not nearly as much fun as computer games. But my job is to prepare you for a life where everything that happens to you will be directly affected by how hard and how well you learn to work. So please tolerate this rule and consider the possibility that I have your interests and your future life at heart.”*

If your child still refuses to care about their schoolwork and refuses to tolerate your rules or limits, apply your chosen rules and limits anyway. **Your child needs you to be the “adult in the room.”** Of course, I recognize that enforcing rules and limits is emotionally difficult and often leaves a parent confused about

how to proceed. In the next chapter I will go into much more detail about how to enforce rules and limits so that you are armed with the skills you will need to be successful.

As an important footnote, I have noticed that when parents start their counseling work with me they think they have lots of rules and limits. But they often do not. What they have is lots and lots of orders, often hastily delivered, sometimes in a raised and irritated voice. Rather than rules and limits calmly expressed, they have irritated chiding. This is not at all effective and is not at all what I ask of parents. **I ask parents to have a handful of well-chosen rules which prescribe behavior which the parents value, and a handful of well-chosen limits which prohibit behavior that is interfering with their child developing in valued ways.**

That is the focus. Nothing more. Period. Orders and shouted instructions are not terribly useful or effective. **Either make a request and work with your kid to learn how to please you, or set a rule. Either give your child advice on what is not good for him, and hope he respects your judgment, or set a limit prohibiting certain behaviors.** But no more orders. No more chiding. No more nagging.

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