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HOW TO CREATE STANDARDS, RULES AND LIMITS FOR YOUR CHILD

This sounds so easy. After all, you have clarified your values, reached agreement with your spouse, and communicated these values to your kids. You have also translated what you value into rules prescribing positive behaviors, and into limits prohibiting actions which interfere with the accomplishment of what you value. What else is there? **How hard can it possibly be to enforce these wonderful rules and limits consistently? Answer: VERY HARD.**

Parents are busy. Parents are juggling many demands. Parents hate conflict with their kids. Parents are human beings who don't want to have to cope with a huge tantrum late at night. Parents are exhausted and would rather do the dishes themselves than find a kid and communicate calmly about how he or she failed to keep the family clean-up rule, and how therefore she has forfeited her phone for the night.

So, yes, **enforcing rules and limits consistently is very hard.** Yet it is the **magic sauce which makes all the other ingredients work together** to make the rational discipline approach work. There is nothing worse for a child than breaking a rule, violating a limit, hearing an angry voice, but escaping any negative consequence by creating a ruckus to get their parents to back off. What he or she learns is how to avoid responsibility by becoming difficult and defensive. This is not the son or daughter you wish to give to your future daughter or son-in-law!

I strongly recommend that once you set a rule or limit, you enforce it consistently, preferable each and every time. Why? Because research has shown that any

negative behavior which you punish only intermittently is harder to get rid of than a negative behavior that is left alone. The child who is punished intermittently figures “Maybe this time they will ignore me or drop the consequence.” They learn to game the system. But when you enforce your rule or limit with a logical and proportional consequence each and every time, children learn very quickly that “There’s a new, no-nonsense sheriff in town and it’s definitely in my interest to reform myself and follow the rule.”

So as hard as it is, **if something means enough to you to make a rule or establish a limit, please enforce it.** Otherwise, don’t make the rule. In fact, one of my rules is: **Never make a rule or a limit which you cannot or will not enforce consistently.**

This brings us naturally to the topic of enforcements. Enforcements are simply what you will do to reinforce positive adherence to the rule and positive observance of the limit, along with what you will do to punish violations of the rule or limit you have set explicitly.

For positive incentives or positive consequences, use yourself whenever possible. Above all, we are preparing our children for life in relationships, both intimate and work relationships. When your children please you by following your rules, definitely show them how pleased you are with them. Thank them for tolerating your limits. Thank them for following your rules. **It is not a naturally ingrained response for children to always be steadfastly compliant.**

Children who are not cowed by fear, shame and guilt will naturally want to do things their own way and will want to test their parents’ rules and limits. Your job is to make them feel appreciated for voluntarily extending their cooperation to you.

You may supplement expressions of appreciation and gratitude with positive rewards in the form of privileges (i.e. extra screen time, watching a family video), or **things** (i.e. a new book, ice cream for dessert) or **experiences**

(a baseball game with dad, a trip to the museum with mom). I often encourage parents to sit with their child and work with their child to create a “Reward Menu” which they can choose from as a reward for complying with parental rules and limits.

For negative incentives, I prefer you simply and honestly express your displeasure, citing the child’s actions, the impact on you and your hope that the child will not choose to do this again. All of this is best delivered without any drama or overwhelming emotion. Your instructive feedback must be delivered without inducing shame and guilt. *“When you made fun of your brother, I was really unhappy. And when you refused to help me carry in the groceries, I was doubly unhappy. I know you can do better than that and hope you will improve tomorrow. Do you want to add anything to what I have said?”*

I prefer this form of negative feedback to parental yelling, blaming or criticizing, all of which simply cause the child to focus on you rather than on your instructional message. Even worse, the child is filled with negative emotion, either about themselves or about you. Nothing good can come from that.

I also am not in favor of giving any child the “silent treatment.” This induces anxiety and abandonment fears in many children. Rather, as stated, develop the communication skills, self-control and courage to simply tell your child what you feel about what they did and ask them to agree to change.

However, some children don’t seem to care about their parents’ requests or feedback. More commonly they care but do not have the self-control to follow through on their good intentions to follow the rules and limits after being corrected by their parents. For these children, supplemental negative consequences are called for.

When parental feedback is insufficient and supplemental negative consequences are needed, I typically counsel the removal of a privilege.

However, **I prefer removing something from your child which is not developmentally needed.** I do not remove freedom to go to the soccer game with the team because the social and physical needs of your child will be hindered. I do remove the treat after the game, or screen time after school for a day, as no child is harmed by missing out for a day on a treat or screen time.

I would like to make a short remark about spanking or slapping. These punishments seem to work, as spanking or slapping a child make the parent feel better instantly and get the child to refrain from violating rules and limits instantly. They work for hours, even days. However, the research has been abundantly clear for decades. Virtually every scientific study arrives at the same conclusion: **physical punishments make children worse in the long run.** One year later the child who is hit or spanked is much more likely to be an angry rule-breaker who refuses to comply, not because of normal developmental needs to engage in parental testing, but out of anger and rebellion towards parents. He may fear his parents but is likely to feel less and less genuine affection towards them. This result has been repeatedly demonstrated, including with identical twins who were parented differently by the same parents. Please don't go down that road.

Before leaving the topic of negative consequences, sometimes referred to as punishments, let me clearly state that **negative consequences or punishments should never be given out of anger and should never be used to cause the child to suffer. Negative consequences are educational devices.** Period. Therefore, as is the case with all educational devices, they must effectively teach a lesson. They must effectively educate and help the child learn a better way.

Here are some of the conditions which I ask parents to put into place when administering a negative consequence:

- 1. Make the consequence educational by making the consequence logically related to the infraction.** For example, your child doesn't do his

homework because she was immersed in social media on her iPhone. Do you take away her outing with you to go shopping, do you take away her iPhone for a period of time, or do you yell at her for being irresponsible?

Answer? *Limit iPhone usage for a period of time as that is quite logically related to the infraction.*

2. **Use the least noxious punishment possible.** The aim is not to make your child suffer or feel so much pain they wouldn't dare defy you again. The aim is to help them learn something about their choice and the subsequent life consequences. **Keep the focus on the lesson, not on yourself.** Rather than use a "shock and awe" approach to your child by overwhelming them with an enormous punitive consequence, I strongly recommend that you provide a proportional consequence which you can increase on the next infraction if it is not enough to get the job done.
3. **Deliver the consequence in a calm and non-critical way.** Rather than say "*I can't believe you would do such a dumb thing. You're grounded,*" it is preferable to say "*Look, you made a poor decision. Everyone makes poor choices. But I want you to learn from this. The consequence I am giving you is my way of helping you learn.*"
4. If your child shows through their altered behavior that they have indeed **learned something, take advantage of this learning moment by recognizing your child's change.** "*I'm pleased to see you made a decision to try this another way.*"
5. There are times when I **allow a child to partially earn early release from my punishment.** I grant "early parole." You may judge that the child has learned something and has actually made an important change in behavior. Sometimes your child engages in "amends-making behavior," like helping you in meaningful ways. At those times, you may "reduce their sentence." But never more than by half, as we don't want children to feel

that they can break a rule or violate a limit and then “make-up” with you in some way to go “Scot free.” As a small footnote, I never count words like “I’m sorry,” or “I won’t do it again,” as a sufficient signal of remorse and learning. It’s nice that they are sorry and vow to avoid recidivism, but words are a bit too easy to say. I rely more on sustained actions.

In conclusion, reward generously and lavishly with positive expressions of appreciation. Punish thoughtfully, logically, and calmly to teach life lessons. Be lavish with positive expressions and thoughtful with negative consequences.

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