

# PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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## Behaviour Management - Rules

### REMEMBER:

- Rules provide children with guidance and security.
- The moral development of children varies like any other area of their development.
- Reminding children about rules before they experience a challenging situation can prevent some problems.
- Regularly make links between behaviour and its impact on others.
- Consistency and modeling from parents are essential to helping children value rules.

Clear rules that are consistently implemented are essential to the development and security of our children. Rules by themselves do not solve all behaviour issues with our children. However they are integral to helping children on the path to becoming responsible, self-disciplined adults.

Rules give families a positive direction to guide behaviour. In the long term they also enable children to develop the self discipline they need to behave as responsible adults.

### WHY HAVE RULES?

Rules clearly communicate to children what behaviours are expected of them. Children are just learning how their behaviour affects others, how to think about the needs of other people, and how to deal with the frustration of not getting what they want.

Having a short list of family rules encourages positive behaviour in children. Rules also provide parents with a tool for dealing with problems and preventing issues from occurring.

Although they may initially dislike the idea of having rules, children come to understand their importance over time. Rules provide children with the security of knowing what is expected of them. Importantly, rules reassure children that the adults in their lives are in charge and care enough about them to put limits around their behaviour. The world can be a scary place for children when they do not have these boundaries.

### DO RULES TEACH CHILDREN HOW TO BEHAVE?

Depending on their age, children have different understandings of what is right and wrong. Just as a child's ability to talk and read develops at different rates, so too does their moral development.

Up until the age of approximately 10 years, children tend to follow rules to avoid being punished rather than because they understand the reason for a rule.

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At around the time when children are moving from primary to high school, they tend to follow rules to get approval and respect from others. It is only in the high school years that they begin to make the connection between rules, and rights or responsibilities.

Discussions about rules help children make the link between their behaviour and its impact on others. Understanding how their behaviour affects others encourages development of empathy. This empathy is necessary for the development of conscience in children, and it is their conscience, rather than a set of rules, that act as an internal guide for their behaviour.

Over time, children are more likely to behave not because of 'the rules' but because they have an understanding of the rights and, more importantly, the feelings of others.

## WHAT ARE GOOD RULES?

It is important not to have too many rules. Five or six is an ideal number. If there are too many rules children may not remember what they are.

Some parents use rules such as:

- Do what mum or dad asks you to do
- Use kind words
- Keep hand and feet to ourselves
- Use your manners when talking
- Take care of our house and belongings
- Be safe and careful

These rules represent what might be important to one family. They cover most problems that can happen, but they are not the only ones you can have. Making your own family rules that reflect your family values and beliefs can be a very worthwhile experience.

A list of your rules can be put up on the refrigerator as a reminder. Young children who cannot read may need some simple pictures to help them identify each rule.

## HOW DO WE TEACH RULES?

Rules need to be discussed and explained with children so that they understand the reason for them. The emphasis should be on respecting the rights of others and doing our best to ensure that everyone in the family feels happy, safe and loved.

Parents can lead the discussion about what rules the family should have. Children may have the tendency to create too many rules. Parents can guide them by talking about what sorts of behaviour makes the family a happy place for everyone to be in.

In your discussions give examples of how the rules apply to your family. For example, being 'safe and careful' means not leaving the house without telling mum or dad. It could also mean that no one is allowed to climb up on top of the furniture. Providing lots of examples helps children learn how the rules apply to their lives.

The Parent Line fact sheet on Family Meetings provides more details on how to have productive discussions with your children about topics such as rules.

## USING RULES TO PREVENT PROBLEMS

A lot of problems can be avoided by simply reminding children when they are in situations that can cause problems.

For instance, if your child is visiting a friend's home where they have hit someone in the past, a quick reminder of '*remember our rule about keeping our hands and feet to ourselves*' could reduce the chance of another incident occurring.

Toddlers and preschoolers may need more direct reminders such as '*don't forget to say thank you*'. The more specific and direct you are with young children, the more likely they are to follow family rules.

Do not underestimate the importance of reminding your children about rules, but keep your reminders brief. A clear, calm, short message is much more effective than a long lecture.

## PRACTISE RULES

One way to ensure children understand family rules is to help them practice the rules. For example, you might practice what being safe and careful means when you go to the park, before actually going there.

A rule such as *'do what mum or dad tell you to do'* could be role played in a relaxed situation before a problem arises. The parent could instruct the child to do something in a fun practice session and praise them for doing so at the same time.

An important time to practice a rule is following a consequence. For example, after time out, briefly remind your child of the rule they need to follow and look for opportunities to notice and praise them for following the rule.

## BE CONSISTENT

Children will try to test the limits set by family rules. They will complain, whine, and may even get angry.

It is important to state the rules calmly and firmly and then be consistent. Ignoring or changing the rules will create a feeling of insecurity in children, and the value and usefulness of your rules will be reduced.

## BE A MODEL

An important part of consistency is making sure that everyone in the family respects the rules – including you yourselves as parents.

For instance, if one of the family rules is to *'use kind words'*, parents need to set an example of this. This 'modelling' of the rules by the adults has a powerful influence on children's behaviour. In this sense, your actions are far more important than your words.

## BE BRIEF

Rules do not need to be explained every time they are broken. Your important discussions linking behaviour, with its impact on others, should take place before or after a problem occurs.

Rules are best discussed away from stressful situations. Parents should talk about how different behaviours make other people feel in casual conversations throughout the day. If a discussion needs to take place after a serious incident, it is best to do this when everyone is calm.

Long explanations and discussions immediately after a problem occurs can actually encourage a child's misbehaviour. This can be because the child may link the misbehaviour as a way to get the parent's attention.

It is better to take the focus off the inappropriate behaviour and put it on the appropriate behaviour instead. Making a brief statement such as *'I feel annoyed when you forget to use kind words'* is enough to say when a problem occurs.

Talking too much may also distract you from providing your child with a consequence for the misbehaviour. Experiencing a consequence is an important part of learning about rules.

Some children become very good at arguing and debating the rules. This can be very annoying and out of frustration parents may actually feel like giving in. Calmly re-state the rule. This provides your child with certainty and consistency, and saves you from getting into debates and power struggles.

## NOTICE RULES BEING FOLLOWED

This can be difficult initially as some parents may be in the habit of noticing their children's behaviour only when they are disruptive or causing problems.

Be on the lookout for opportunities where you can praise and encourage your child for doing the right thing. Surprise them by saying something like *'you two look like you are having a great time together talking nicely to each other'*.

Children need to know that they can get your attention when they are being well behaved and not only when they misbehave

## RULES AND ADOLESCENTS

Family rules and how they are applied will change as children get older and become adolescents. Rules will need to be discussed and negotiated over time to be more adaptable to your children as they mature into adults. See the adolescents section of our website for more information on this age group.