

“Why won't my kids listen to me?”

You nag, you threaten, sometimes you even spank—and still your kids don't mind you. Here's the best way to discipline—and the only way that works every time

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BY KENNETH KAYE, PH.D.

Joe and Patty have three rules for their 11- and 13-year-old sons. The boys “must” do their homework before watching television. They “must” practice piano for half an hour every day. And they “must” cut the grass every week. What actually happens at Joe and Patty's house is this: When the boys watch TV before they do their homework, sometimes they get away with it and sometimes they get yelled at. If the boys miss a day of piano practice, they had better have a good excuse. If they miss a lot of days, they get yelled at. Their father nags them constantly to cut the grass. When he gets tired of nagging—you guessed it, he yells. This is not a system of rules; it's a system of nagging and yelling.

Ineffectual rules are the same as no rules at all. When there are no rules, children are free to make more and more demands on their parents. Yet despite what these children seem to be “getting away with,” they are in fact being deprived of something essential: the sense of security and acceptance that all children need. Such children grow up to be at best unpleasant, at worst seriously disturbed. This is certainly not what Joe and Patty intend.

How do parents get into such trouble over the simple job of enforcing family rules? They either become too authoritarian—expecting their children to jump when they say jump—or too permissive. Permissive parents may have all the best motives: They don't want to be tyrants; they do want to respect the child's independent judgment and make his opinion count. They want a democracy, which works fine for certain family decisions—what restaurant or movie to go to, for instance—but does not work in matters of health, safety, education and the way children are allowed to treat others.

The family should be organized as a hierarchy, with the more competent members, the parents, at the top. The structure has to be flexible enough, however, to advance the fundamental goal of parents: not to control children's lives but to help develop young people who can control their own. Children need rules because they need the security of knowing that someone competent is in charge. They need to know that someone cares. (Parents who act as if their children's behavior does not matter imply that the children themselves don't matter.) And most important, children need a structure that defines what it means to “be good.” Clear rules give them a way to build their own self-esteem, to say to themselves: “If I work hard at meeting these demands, I can succeed.”

If you have never before been able to set appropriate limits for your children, if your children won't listen, if you want to stop nagging, complaining, yelling and spanking, this is how to start.

TEN STEPS TO MAKING FAMILY RULES

1 Understand your purpose. Family rules are not a way of getting your children to fulfill all your hopes for them—that they become straight-A students or star athletes and never bother you with problems. The purpose of making rules is to ensure your children's safety and welfare, to benefit the family and to promote harmony.

2 A rule is something you insist on. You don't need to insist on things your children are already doing. Rules, therefore, will apply to behavior you want to see changed. Write your rules down and make sure they are clear and specific. “Take enough vitamins” is clear but not specific. “Swallow one vitamin tablet every morning” is both.

3 Start with as few rules as possible. You can always add to them later on. You need write down only the standing rules. One-time spoken rules, such as “We're not

going to the beach until the family room has been cleaned up," will come naturally.

4 Each rule must include an appropriate consequence for disobedience. "If Sandra doesn't wash the dishes every night before getting on the phone with her friends, she loses phone privileges for 24 hours." A consequence is a specific punishment the child knows about in advance, one that restricts his or her freedom. Sometimes the consequence will flow naturally from the child's action, as in: "Misuse the phone, lose the phone." But if there is no such "natural" consequence, you can substitute any reasonable withdrawal of freedom. A seven-year-old might be sent to his room for 15 minutes, a 12-year-old grounded for the night, a 17-year-old denied use of the family car.

5 Formally present the list to your children. Each will receive a different list of rules, of course, in keeping with his age and abilities. One child may be given the rule "You must take the garbage out each night or you won't be allowed to watch TV." Another will be told "You must be in bed at 8:30 each night with the lights out or your bedtime will be moved up 15 minutes the next night." What do you say when the first child complains, "Why do I have to take out the garbage? Why doesn't he have to?" You explain: "These are *your* rules and you are expected to follow them. Your brother has his own rules to follow."

6 Expect your children to test the rules. Show them you are serious by following through with the promised consequences. This means you must list only punishments you are willing and able to perform. A parent who says, "If you ever take money from my purse again, I'll break your arm" will end up breaking the rule and not the arm. Notice I use the word "break" for what parents do to a rule, not for what children do. Only parents have the ability to break a rule, by not following through with the consequences.

7 Amend your rules as necessary. For example, suppose you've given your daughter the following rule: "Keep your room neat or I won't vacuum it." She continues to leave the place a mess because she really doesn't care if you never vacuum it again. You have two choices here. You can tell her, "Since you don't care what your room looks like, I don't either," and eliminate the rule. Or you can try to make her want to obey by changing the consequences. From now on you will dock her allowance or restrict her to the house on weekends until her room is picked up *and* vacuumed—*by her*.

8 Escalate the consequences as necessary, starting with the smallest increase you think might get the message across. Rather than double the time your child is grounded, add half an hour. That way the child has a chance to conform to the rule before you reach an impossible consequence. If the behavior then improves, remember to reward

the child by reducing the consequence to its original level. Make all these changes clearly on your written rules.

9 Don't get caught playing "Whodunit?" and "Who started it?" How do you know who threw the first punch? What do you do when it is clear that someone let the dog out but you don't know who? There is an easy and effective way to deal with both problems: State your rules in such a way that if the real culprit isn't obvious, everyone who might have been involved will be punished. This saves you from having to play detective. It also accomplishes something more important: It forces the kids to work things out as much as possible among themselves.

10 If your children catch you nagging at them or complaining about something that is not part of your written rules, admit your error. Then either drop the subject or make a new rule. And apologize to your kids.

If parents sit down together and thrash out their written rules—no matter how long it takes—so that they finally come up with an explicit list that they both agree to enforce, and if they stick to this plan without undermining each other later, the children will almost always shape up. (For reasons why they may not, see box at right.)

Let's go back now to Joe and Patty, the couple who had three "rules." How did they reformulate the rules to make them work? They decided that the boys would not be allowed to watch TV until after they had shown their homework to one of the parents. If either boy tried to watch TV before showing his homework, he had to go to bed. If the boys did not mow the grass by noon on Saturday, they wouldn't get their allowances that week. Dad, by the way, was no longer responsible for reminding them of this chore. (Note that it is a joint chore; if the grass is not cut, both boys lose their allowances.)

Joe and Patty felt they could not insist that the boys take piano lessons (see Step Number One: Family rules are not a way of getting your children to fulfill all your hopes for them). But for the sake of family peace and harmony, Joe and Patty did make a rule about practicing: If the boys did not practice, the lessons would stop. Of course the parents preferred that the lessons continue, but not at the price of continued nagging and yelling.

A PREFERENCE IS NOT A RULE

Preferences do not have to be consistent; rules do. A preference can be conveniently vague, whereas a rule must be perfectly clear. To a child who is going outside to play you may say, "Don't go too far." This is a preference because it leaves the meaning of "too far" to the child's own judgment.

If you want to turn a preference into a rule, you have to say, "Don't leave the yard," or, "Don't cross the street," and then state a consequence. This means that the first time

If Your Child Still Won't Obey

What if your system of family rules isn't working? You've escalated the punishments and it's still no good. What now? There are four possible reasons why the child cannot do what you expect of him:

- The child may be physically ill, in which case he should be given a temporary set of rules until he is well enough to return to full participation in the family.

- The child may be emotionally disturbed or have a learning disability or some chronic organic impairment. In this case he needs therapy or remedial help.

- You are giving confusing or inconsistent messages because you have not really resolved to control your child's behavior. He has found that the payoff for continuing his obnoxious behavior is greater than the cost of abandoning it. In this case the whole family may need therapy.

- The remaining possibility is that the child does not believe you are really taking charge. Children do not want weak parents who will back down in the face of resistance; they want strong parents who will stand firm on important matters. Your child may continue to test you in the hopes that if he pushes you far enough, you will stand up to him. Do it. —K.K.

your two-year-old draws crayon pictures on the wall, you may weep, you may faint or you may look very unhappy but you should not punish her—because until then there was no rule against wall art. Instead you should tell her not to do it again and then explain that now you are writing down a new rule: "No drawing, painting or marking on anything except drawing paper, or crayons will be confiscated for a week."

Don't worry that she can't read the rules. She will remember what you tell her they are.

REWARDS ALONE DON'T WORK

Trying to control your child's behavior simply through a system of rewards is a bad idea. For one thing, many so-called rewards are in fact harmful. I am not talking about sincere praise, but about the more tangible kinds of rewards—toys, candy, money—which create worse problems than they solve. For example, once a child has more toys than he has time to enjoy, you have run out of effective bribes with which to purchase his cooperation. This leads to the use of consumable rewards such as ice cream or candy. When that kind of reward is used on a regular basis, children learn to associate junk food with love or appreciation. When they get older, food will become a source of emotional rather than physical nourishment.

"Paying" children to obey basic rules makes as much sense as society paying adults to obey the law. Imagine being given a dollar every time you

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went to the bank without robbing it, a candy bar every time you went to the supermarket without shoplifting. It may work in the short run, but most likely would not engender any sense of responsibility.

SPANKINGS DON'T WORK EITHER

Most of us have resorted to an open-handed swat on the backside now and then. In certain circumstances—if a two-year-old makes a practice of running out into the street, for instance—a spanking may be the appropriate response. Nonetheless, sparing the rod does not spoil the child. Spankings and other physical punishments are less effective than natural consequences, restrictions and penalties. If you never hit your kid—period—then you'll never have to worry about where to draw the line. Severe spankings hurt. The angrier you are, the harder you hit. There is no clear boundary between severe corporal punishment and physical abuse.

On the other hand, if you spank with the intention of not hurting the child—with a little "pat on the butt"—you teach the child that you are not serious. Remember, you *are* serious. And for a punishment to be effective, a parent must have the option of escalating it in the future. Once you have hit as hard as you can, you have no further options except longer or more brutal spankings.

In addition to the practical problems of spanking-as-discipline, there are philosophical problems as well. Since it is easier to take a two-year-old over your knee than it is a 14-year-old, you have to admit that spanking a young child is taking unfair advantage of your size. And corporal punishment not only demeans the child, by implying he is not worthy of respect, it also demeans the parent. Winning your child's respect means convincing him to behave like a civilized human being without behaving like a brute yourself.

The more you try to rationalize spankings to your child, the more credibility you lose. No child believes a spanking is for his own good, or that it hurts the parent more than it does him.

WHAT TO DO IF "NOTHING WORKS"

"We've taken away her phone privileges for a year—there's nothing else we can do." "The only thing he understands is my belt."

I hear these cries of helplessness from parents who are otherwise intelligent, imaginative and effective people. Something happens to their effectiveness when they try to cope with their children. The question is: Are they helpless because their children are so troublesome or are the children troublesome because their parents are so helpless?

Get out of the "nothing works" syndrome. Make a list of everything you do for your children. Include every cent spent on them in the last month, every time you helped any of them with anything, every minute you devoted to their needs and desires at the expense of your own.

Now cross out the following items: food, essential clothing, shelter, health care and praise. Everything else you provide for your children you can stop providing if they misbehave or are inconsiderate or abusive. Different parents will have to choose for themselves, from their own lists, which services they are prepared to withdraw and in what order. You can easily refuse to vacuum your child's room if he is leaving it a mess. It would probably take more serious misbehavior before you would refuse to drive him anywhere or before you would make him cook his own meals.

Surely you can list a dozen or more services you now perform routinely for your children. Think about the help you give them with schoolwork (typing, preparing posters, special excursions), parties you help them arrange, expensive clothing and accessories you lend them, lessons you pay for. I

am not insisting that you stop doing those particular things. My experience indicates, however, that once you have made a complete list and ranked all the items, you will no longer feel so helpless.

Something works; you have to find it!

TEACH YOUR CHILD TO HANDLE FREEDOM

Children should be allowed independence when they show that they are ready to handle it responsibly. Don't be afraid to test them out in safe situations. If children do not respect the rules, they can be pulled back to a more restrictive way of living. They are grounded, for example, whenever they choose to get themselves grounded. They do without TV when they choose to postpone their chores. They either conform to the rules or take the consequences. It is their choice.

You need not harp on that message; children learn it every time they suffer a consequence that reduces their freedom. All you need are rules that are as explicitly stated and as consistently enforced as the most important traffic laws. The fewer rules, the better. The more reliably you detect violations and the more swiftly and decisively you punish them, the better.

And the less preaching, nagging and complaining from parents, the better. Family rules aren't meant to turn parents into authoritarians. They're meant to help children mature by offering them choices and letting them choose the consequences, just as adults must do. In the structure of family rules, children can grow up to be happy, successful people: self-controlled, self-motivated and self-respecting. ●

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