

The Rules For Making Rules

or

Getting Kids to Do Chores Without Nagging, Screaming, Threats or Promising Them Trips to Disneyland

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1) When kids are old enough, they should keep their rooms clean without constant reminders from grownups. They **SHOULD** want to do it. They **OUGHT** to understand the feelings and needs of the grownups in this matter.

They do not. Let us go on from there.

Perhaps in a perfect world, kids would think just like grownups do. Nobody can transplant a 35 year old's experiences into a middle school child's brain.

2) Left to their own devices, kids will sometimes be lazy and irresponsible. That is why they need grownups.

Kids are just like anybody else. They do what they want, when they want, until somebody makes them do something else. Kids have no instinctive drive for doing chores.

3) Grownups and kids rarely argue over identity, personal space or communication styles -- mostly they argue over who is going to do the dishes.

Psychologists say a lot of complex things about family dynamics -- but a remarkable number of family problems are triggered by simple disagreements about who will bring the laundry downstairs or clean up after the cat eats. Every week, millions of pleasant evenings across America are ruined by arguments over picking up the stuff in the living room.

4) Solve the chore problem and one goes a long way toward establishing family harmony.

Removing the recurrent difficulties and tensions surrounding chores often takes an edge of anger and hostility out of household relationships, and makes everybody happier.

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5) GROWNUPS set the rules about chores, and GROWNUPS must be sure they are followed. Kids will not do either one on their own.

How many grownups have put a list of rules up on the refrigerator, somehow hoping the kids would check the list twice a day, and do whatever the chores they found there?

In the world of business, management sends out a memo, and hopes that everybody will follow the directive just because it showed up in their mailboxes.

Neither approach works.

6) Rules work best when kids believe that they have to do what the grownups tell them. That is authority.

Authority is a factor in a relationship, where one party has the perceived right to demand compliance. This is a belief held by the person under authority, and authority only works when those under it expect and believe that they must comply, even when they would prefer to do otherwise.

Once authority is established, very little direct power must be employed. However, it is often necessary to exert power to establish authority.

7) Nobody inherits authority from their grandparents anymore. You have to earn it for yourself.

Many grownups are unhappy because their kids do not automatically obey. However, when grownups tell them to do things, but do not follow through, it is hardly surprising that kids do not recognize parental authority.

Today's grownups say, "When we were kids, we did what our parents told us without argument." Maybe, maybe not. Still, a number of changes in society have undermined parental authority in our time. That makes it more difficult, but hardly impossible. There is just less built-in social training on which to rely.

8) Authority is formed by consistently and calmly enforcing rules over time.

Grownups get authority when they PROVE to their kids that the rules must be followed. Children accustomed to making their own decisions resist mightily, but as grownups consistently follow through over time, the resistance, hostility and frustration fade away.

9) Real rules have three parts:

A) A clear statement of the expectation

B) Supervision and follow through to make sure the child follows the rule

C) Consistency over time.

The first is easy, the second is a little harder, and the third is the really tough part.

PART A) A CLEAR STATEMENT OF THE EXPECTATION.

10) If there are two grownups in a house, they have to agree on the rules -- or the kids will make up their own.

If the grownups have not agreed on the rule, it becomes a new thing for them to fight about -- but the kids still will not do the chores.

11) If it does not start, "The rule is . . ." and go on to say what the kid is supposed to do and when, it is not a rule. If it is not a rule, the kid will not consistently follow it. It is as simple as that.

"Would you like to help me" ... is not a rule.

"If you don't do this, you'll lose your allowance" . . . is not a rule.

"I just feel like I need a little help around here". . . is not a rule.

"Don't you think we all need to carry our fair share?" . . . is not a rule.

"When are you going to be responsible enough to take care of your own things?" . . . is not a rule.

"When you trash the house, I feel like nothing I do matters to you" . . . is not a rule.

"The rule is, take the trash out every night right after dinner. Take it all the way out to the garbage can, and be sure the you put the lid back on the can."

That is a rule!

12) Kids will do as little as the grownup's words allow.

"You said wash the dishes -- you didn't say anything about putting them away!"

13) In establishing authority, the three most important words are, "**The rule is.**"

Practice saying those words again and again and again. This should become the grownup's signal for "Listen, I really mean this."

Rules are not personal -- they exist "out there", and one can defuse personal confrontations by keeping a focus on the rule, not on the child who is resisting.

14) Each rule should include a description of the behavior and a clear statement of when it is to be done.

This should be specific and complete. Lots of families find it helps to write down the rules -- not because any list of rules will be self-enforcing, but because it will remind the grownups of the rules they decided on.

Here are some examples. "The rule is, pick up all your stuff in the living room right before dinner." "The rule is, wipe out your bathroom sink, pick up your towels and put away your toothbrush by 7:30 in the morning".

15) Time is a critical element of every rule.

The most common cause for rule failure is being vague about WHEN the chore is to be done. For example, telling a child to pick up his room on Saturday is OK, but Saturday lasts a long time, up until 11:59 on Saturday night. When, on Saturday, do you plan to supervise?

We think leaving the kid latitude about when to do the chore builds independence. Actually, it usually just stretches out the tension.

16) State when the child should start, not when the chore should be finished.

Tell a child to do the dishes by 8:00, and she will start at 7:55. If the grownup brings it up at 7:00, the kid will say, "But you said by eight, and it's only five after seven. The grownup gets a headache, and the kid gets to go on watching TV."

Instead, say” The rule is, do the dishes at 6:30” or “The rule is, do the dishes as soon as we’re done eating.”

17) Time can be stated in several ways.

There are at least three kinds of time statements.

- a) Clock time, ("At seven")
- b) Event time, ("Right after dinner")
- c) Some other time, ("Whenever you prefer".)

Kids prefer Choice C, because it often means "never". You will probably want to select one of the other options.

PART B) SUPERVISE AND FOLLOW THROUGH TO MAKE SURE THE CHILD FOLLOWS THE RULE

18) Grownups cannot enforce a rule without the will or the way to supervise.

Simply put, there are very few self-supervising kids. If your child is already responsible when no grownup is around, just be grateful. However, if there are problem behaviors when the child is unsupervised, the grownups must arrange for more supervision. Until somebody invents the radio-controlled kid, there is no alternative.

Sometimes grownups find that they have to renegotiate their work schedules or hire somebody else to supervise their kids. This can be a real challenge -- but nobody ever said that having kids would be convenient.

19) Without supervision, you cannot have the rule.

If there is no way a grownup can supervise the rule, do not undermine your authority by trying to enforce the rule by remote control.

A typical set up for failure is "When you come home from school, change your clothes and put away your knapsack before you turn on the TV." If no grownup is there, how will you ever know if they did it?

The simplest solution is usually to schedule the chore when there is an adult there to supervise.

20) Rewards and punishment are not supervision.

Rewards for doing chores only work when the kid wants the reward more than they want to get out of the chore.

Punishment for leaving chores undone breaks down as soon as the kid would rather accept the punishment than pick up the bedroom.

Often, parents end up negotiating for bigger rewards, or getting caught in cycles of escalating anger and harsher punishment. Both of these undermine authority.

21) When it is time for a kid to do a chore, a grownup must be in the room.

If a child is not already doing chores consistently without supervision, you should plan on being present to supervise.

Remind your child of the rule. "The rule is, pick up all the dishes in the living room as soon as I get home from work. Pick them up now." Eventually, you can shorten this to, "John, the dishes," once he's in the habit of doing them right away.

Sometimes an extremely responsible older sibling can enforce chores, but this is often a setup for resentment and failure.

22) Stay there till the chore is finished.

This is a critical step. If the child is somewhat more reliable, you can leave once you see that the work is well underway -- and then come back to check in a few minutes.

23) Stay there even if it takes a long time. The time required for effective supervision gets shorter after a while.

The first few times, grownups may find that supervision feels like a struggle. Just stay there, and keep repeating the rule. The child will eventually do the chore when they figure out that you are not going to simply give up and go away. Steady calm persistence is a powerful tool.

24) Lectures teach kids one thing -- how to look like they are listening when they are not.

Sometimes one can catch their eyes glazing over. Grownups think they are explaining the relationship between how tidy a kid's room is and what college they will get into ten years from now. You're thinking this will make an important difference. Your kid is thinking, "I hope this is over before my show starts."

25) Arguing with a kid about a rule is not supervision.

Kids will come up with all sorts of distractions and arguments. The rule is not fair, she had a hard day at school, he has a headache, or just simply, "This rule is stupid." The only point of the argument is avoiding the chore.

You can deal with each of these points after the chore is done.

26) Instead of arguing, deflect the debate and come back to the rule.

Gregory Bodenhammer (Back in Control) came up with the idea of argument deflectors. When the kid argues, just deflect the argument, and go back to the rule. He suggests the words, "Nevertheless" and "Regardless"

"I'm real tired from baseball "

"Regardless, do your bathroom chores now."

"I didn't make the mess."

"Nevertheless, the rule is that you pick up the toys in the back yard before dinner. Pick them up now."

27) You can state the rule a hundred times if you need to.

Kids hate this, but it is really effective. Simply stand there and repeat the rule until they follow it.

28) Kids argue and pitch fits because it works.

Tantrums, swearing, "pushing your buttons" all serve the same purpose -- they get you off the subject of making Yolanda pick up her dirty clothes.

Do not fall for it. Just keep saying, "Yolanda, the rule is pick your clothes up right after school. Pick them up now."

29) It took a long time to get that good at arguing -- it will take a while to unlearn the habits.

Parents wish these problems would get better right away. It takes a while. Most families report that if they put the chores on a schedule, and consistently supervise,

making sure their kids do them every time, resistance generally goes away within about three weeks.

30) If you are having real problems, increase your numerical advantage, rather than increasing your volume.

If you are having a lot of trouble with a particular chore, and two grownups live in the house, rescheduling the chore for a time when both grownups can be there often solves the problem. Sometimes, grownups may even invite another family member or a friend to come and help with the supervision.

31) There is no place for violence in rule enforcement.

Once parents get violent, authority has been replaced by raw power. When you play the power game, your kids will too.

If you lose your temper and strike out at a kid, you run the very real risk of dealing with a social worker if the kid decides to up the ante and call 911. This undermines your authority and control even further.

Certainly it can be rebuilt -- many families with a history of family violence have effectively used the rules in this handout -- but the easiest solution is to avoid violence from the outset.

32) Real violence usually erupts after a period of escalating anger, and failure to effectively supervise.

Our experience is that the best way of avoiding violence is to set the rules clearly, and follow through with consistent supervision. Deflecting the arguments helps avoid hurt and angry feelings. Stay calm, restate the rule and do not go away. If you are afraid you are going to lose your temper, stick your hands in your pockets and keep them there while you talk.

PART C) CONSISTENCY OVER TIME.

33) If grownups follow through and supervise the same chore rules for a month, they become almost automatic.

If kids have to pick up the living room every evening at 6:00 PM, and a grownup shows up to supervise night after night, eventually the kids assume there's no way to

get out of it. They may not start on their own, but they will expect that reminder -- and now and then they may even do the living room before the grownup gets there.

34) If grownups supervise consistently for a week, and then stop, the kid assumes that the rule has been changed.

This is easily seen. If a grownup cleans up after the dog once, kids figure it is the grownup's job from now on.

Even after a long period of supervision, a kid will occasionally try ducking out of a chore -- or legitimately forget. Grownups should remember that if a kid avoids a chore twice in a row, they believe that the rule no longer applies.

35) If one grownup insists that the kids do a certain chore, and the other one does not, there is no clear rule.

If one grownup wants the kids to do the dishes, and the other does not support and help supervise, what they have produced is a new opportunity for the grownups to fight -- after they have done the dishes.

36) Having kids is not a labor saving decision. Doing the work yourself is always more efficient than getting a kid to do it. Housework is easier than teaching responsibility.

Grownups may spend half an hour getting a child to clean a room that they could pick up in five minutes. They do it because they are teaching the kids responsibility.

Teaching is harder than housework -- do not get confused by thinking this will save any time.

37) Your kids will be grateful and thank you for setting clear rules -- when they are 26 or 27 years old.

Kids will not be grateful for being made to pick up their rooms. However, when they are older, they will appreciate the importance of parents who care enough to follow through.