



## **Making and Enforcing Rules**

Rules are essential for cooperative living in all groups, including families and classrooms. Yet, in many settings, rules are non-existent, unclear or inconsistent. Parents and other adults don't always know how to make and enforce rules for children. The following guidelines can be helpful.

### **Making rules**

1. Rules are needed to protect the health, safety and individual rights of each family or group member. Avoid making rules to satisfy your own whims and preferences (e.g., don't ask too many questions).
2. State rules in the positive. Tell children what they can do instead of what not to do.
3. Give reasons for rules that can be understood by children. Remember: children are concrete thinkers and may not understand abstract concepts like honesty, justice or fair play.
4. Make rules that are appropriate for the developmental age of the child. Children must have the knowledge and ability to live up to the expectations underlying a rule.
5. Make rules simple, few in number and easy to remember.
6. Rules must be enforceable. Specify fair and reasonable consequences for breaking the rules. Ask yourself: what am I going to do if my child breaks this rule? If you can't think of any concrete response, don't make the rule.
7. Avoid changing or modifying rules too often. Although subject to review and somewhat flexible, rules generally should not be changed. If rules are unclear, constantly changing or uncertain, children will be confused and their behavior will reflect this.
8. Put rules in writing and let kids see them.
9. Follow the rules yourself. Many children and most teens point out double standards that undermine rules and your authority.

### **Enforcing rules**

1. Fair, calm and consistent enforcement of rules is absolutely essential. Without consistent enforcement, rules become meaningless. If you're unwilling or unsure how to enforce a rule, eliminate it.
2. Remind young children of the rules often. Ask them to state and explain the rule in their own words.
3. Give children time to learn and conform to the rules.
4. Expect children and teens to test rules. They test your authority for several reasons: they may be trying to assert their autonomy, think a rule unfair, or lack the self-control to deal with their own impulses and need the firm and consistent enforcement of rules to protect them from anti-social, unsafe or self-destructive tendencies.
5. Every rule should have a consequence that is naturally or logically related to it. You may not always use the consequence when kids break rules, but there should always be one that can be applied.

Source: Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.