

Setting Rules

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Debbie and Randy post the rules of the house on the refrigerator, all 47 of them. One sheet lists 25 rules; a second lists 22. Each rule begins with the word, no. They expect their two children to follow these rules to the letter. Most of the time they do not.

The couple's instincts are sound. Setting clear rules and limits for children is important and should be done. It is their approach that is a bit overwhelming.

They have far too many rules. At the office, Debbie and Randy are middle managers. They know rules, abide by rules, write rules, enforce rules. But at home, they're dealing with a five-year-old and an 11-year-old. They only need a few rules, not an employee handbook.

Sometimes it is hard for children to remember what the rules are. They have a set at school, at home, and the rules may be different at grandma's house. Parents should pick only the most important ones, the ones they are willing and able to enforce.

Choose five or six major rules your children need to work on. Important ones, such as, "No jumping on the bed," if that is a serious problem. When jumping on the bed is no longer a problem, replace it with a new rule.

Rules should be reasonable and age-appropriate. If short separate lists for each child are necessary, use them. Make it as easy as possible for kids to follow.

Also write down what will happen if the rule is broken. Rules and consequences should be discussed with the children. That means you must decide the punishment before posting the rule, not at the time of the infraction. When a rule is broken, stick to the prescribed punishment. If the punishment needs to be revised, wait a few days, then discuss the new one with your child.

Listing what kids should do is a more positive approach than listing everything they should not do. "Disagree politely," may be better than, "Don't talk back," for example. But some things, like jumping on the bed, are simply "no's."

When a rule is broken, follow through calmly, but firmly, with the consequence – every time. No exceptions, no warnings, no maybes.

Now, the tough part. Show your children that you obey rules too, not only the children's rules – no swearing, for example – but also adult rules, such as obeying the speed limit. The police may not be watching, but your children are.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.