

Making rules and setting limits

Rules and limits are important for guiding children’s behaviour

Children need to know what you expect of them in order to behave appropriately. This does not mean giving children lots of dos and don’ts – having too many rules, or rules that are too complicated, often confuse children.

It is often helpful to involve children in setting some basic rules. This helps them understand the value of having rules and motivates them to cooperate. For example, you might discuss as a family the sorts of rules that will help you all get on well together. These might include things like talking to each other rather than shouting, asking before borrowing things, putting away games and toys after playing with them, or taking a turn to wash up after dinner. Deciding as a family those things that are most important to you and stating rules positively so that children know what *to* do rather than simply being told what *not* to do works best.

Set limits for children by giving clear directions for what you expect of them. Providing reasons for the directions you give helps children accept your limits without becoming defensive. It also gives them a basis for understanding what you will expect of them in other similar situations. The following examples show how parents and carers can set limits for children in positive ways.

Kind of limit	Limit stated negatively	Limit stated positively with reasons
Protection from physical harm	“Don’t go outside the gate.”	“Stay in the yard. The street is too busy and you might get hurt.”
	“Stop poking at your sister.”	“Be gentle with your baby sister. She is too small for rough play.”
Looking after things	“Don’t leave your toys lying around.”	“Pack up now and put your toys away on the shelf so we can be ready to go out.”
	“Don’t do that here.”	“Take the ball outside if you want to play with it. Something might get broken if you play with it inside.”
Showing respect and care for others	“Stop being mean to him.”	“You need to play in a friendly way. Make sure Max has a turn too.”
	“Don’t take her things.”	“Be sure to ask first before you borrow something from your friend. You would want her to ask before taking your things.”



Following up

Providing positive consequences for positive behaviour is very important and effective for encouraging children to comply with rules and expectations. For example:

- When children do what you have asked, be sure to notice it and praise or thank them.
- Expect some lapses as changing or learning new behaviours takes time. Be prepared to offer reminders without nagging.
- Checklists and reward charts can be useful for keeping track of positive behaviour and motivating children to complete assigned tasks.

If children repeatedly ignore your clear and reasonable instructions, logical consequences may be necessary. Logical consequences are directed at stopping the undesired behaviour rather than punishing the child.

Examples include:

- Withdrawal from the situation (quiet time) – use when behaviour is unsafe or disruptive.
- Withdrawal of privileges – use when an activity or toy is being misused or neglected. For example, remove a toy that has been used in an unsafe way or fought over.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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