Setting Limits

The most important thing that parents do for children is to love them. The second most important thing parents do for children’s long-term well-being is probably to set and enforce reasonable limits. (See the unit on spoiling.) When parents are effective in setting limits they teach children to respect the rules and laws that govern well-being.

Sometimes parents annoy their children with lots of pesky commands: ‘Don’t touch that.’ ‘Leave that alone.’ ‘Don’t do that.’ ‘Come here.’ ‘I told you not to do that!’ There are two problems with this approach: The talk is all negative - about things NOT to be done. The second problem is that lots of little rules are hard to enforce; when we do not consistently enforce the rules we make with our children, they conclude that they do not have to take any of our commands seriously. That can have dangerous consequences.

Be careful about the rules you make. Don’t make a rule unless you think it is worth your time and effort to enforce it. You may decide to let less important things slide. For example, you may decide that you don’t care if your child wears striped pants with a plaid shirt, has a crazy hairdo, or listens to rap. But you may decide that rules about TV watching and joining the family for dinner are important enough to you that you will enforce them consistently.

Make rules that are sensitive to children’s needs. Children like to feel safe, be busy, and be involved. They may be able to sit still on a car trip or in a meeting if we provide a quiet book or activities for them. They may be able to help in the grocery store if we talk with them, let them handle safe things and even involve them in making some choices. Sometimes children ‘misbehave’ simply because we are asking them to do things that are difficult or impossible for them.

When you have made a rule, enforce it. For example, if a child is picking at a cake before a birthday party begins, a parent may decide, ‘I want her to leave that cake alone until we sing ‘Happy Birthday’ and cut it for everyone.’ If you think that rule is important, act in ways that win cooperation. If you merely ignore a child’s misbehavior, you send the message that you do not really care about the rule.

If you leave the child staring at the cake, you are fighting an uphill battle. The child is likely to go for the cake and we are likely to get angry. It is better to prevent problems than to treat them. There are many positive ways to help a child obey. Win cooperation through positive approaches. Move the cake. Get the child busy. Provide an alternative treat to hold her over. If the child is very persistent, we may have to guide her to her room until she is ready to work within the rule.
Every child will break some rules some time. When children make mistakes, we can help them learn better ways. Use timeouts and consequences to teach them. Teaching is different from punishing. Punishing just makes children sorry. Teaching works with the child to help them learn better ways of living and acting.

Applications:

What are some rules you often make and rarely enforce?

Which of them do you not really care about? You can always say to your children, "I have been thinking about our rules and have decided that some of them are less important. I am not going to worry so much about (your socks being put in the hamper every night or . . . )."

Which rules do you think are important? Let your children know that you are renewing your commitment to enforce the rules.

Are there some important rules that your children have a hard time obeying? What can you do to set your children up for success - to help them obey those rules?

Sometimes the rule is really the parent’s problem. For example, if I don’t like things left on the sofa, rather than demand that they put things away, I can simply take anything that is left on the sofa and put it on the child’s bed. I don’t have to be angry or demanding. I can solve my own problem without irritating the children.

What is a reasonable consequence if your child does not obey the rule? Plan ahead how you will respond so that you are prepared.