LIVING BY THE RULES

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ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

The first thing that needs to be in place for any group of people to function well together is rules. I know you might wonder, "Rules? What have they got to do with our family?" Trust me; they do matter. In fact, consciously or unconsciously every family has a lot of rules. They may not have been stated clearly or passed after a unanimous vote, though sometimes that could be a great way of making them (especially when kids are involved). It could be something simple like not being outside of the house after 8 pm in the evening unless for a special occasion.

I remember a few rules that we practiced at home: Nobody will watch television while eating food. That was a great rule because it allowed every member of our family to be fully present at the meal table and indulge in conversation with each other. Another rule that we had which is connected to the first one is: Meals will be taken together. So even if a member of the family was late in coming, say Dad returned a little late from work in the afternoon, we would wait for him so that we could eat together as a family. This impressed upon us kids the importance of waiting on other members of the family. It taught us to value persons and to accompany one another even if they were running late.

So rules are a good thing. Society functions well because of rules. Imagine there were no rules for traffic. There would be chaos and confusion. Rules help things to run smoothly and ensure that everybody can get what they want. But they should be reasonable. The aim of rules is basically to instill a sense of discipline which in turn fosters co-operation. Discipline is a key word in a parent's dictionary. It is about helping children to learn to manage themselves, their feelings, their behaviour and their impulses. Parents would like their kids to develop a sound moral compass, and learn to distinguish between those impulses or feelings which are socially "appropriate" or "in-appropriate", be able to justify judgments about their choices and act on them with conviction.

Without rules children would run wild. They would set the house on fire, walk in the middle of the road, and take whatever they want from the supermarket and so on. I'm exaggerating but you get the point. Children need limits. They need to know what's safe (playing football in the back-yard) and what's unsafe (playing cricket on the street). Telling a child they can't do something unsafe is not the same as punishing them. Children will understand that somethings are not to be done when they are prevented from doing them either verbally or physically. For example, a child will learn not to play with the knife if it is taken from her hand whenever she gets hold of it.

Children's first reaction to prevention is usually crying. That's alright. A little crying won't harm anyone as long as the message has gone across. At this point it is very important not to behave rudely or condescendingly since the child will sense it and will feel threatened. One way of dealing with this situation is listening to the child and letting him/her know that you understand how he/she feels but that you are willing to stand your ground.

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

It is one thing to make rules but it is another to get people or in this case children to follow them. To that end, rewards and punishments come as a useful help. It is basic psychology that says that living beings will do things that promote life and pleasure,

and avoid those that cause pain. Let's say that there are two bowls of chocolates before a child. One, set of chocolates are wrapped in red paper while the other are wrapped in green. The red chocolates are quite bitter as compared to the green ones which are sweet. After the child tastes the red chocolate the first time and realizes that the taste in not appealing, he/she will avoid those chocolates in the future. Why does the child do so? Simple, he/she associates the red chocolates with badness and the green ones with goodness and so when given a choice will opt for the green chocolates. Such a process is called conditioning and is quite helpful in educating children to make healthy choices.

The danger of conditioning is that it leads children to look for external motivations to behave in a desirable way. Over time, some say, that it overrides a child's natural inclination to do the right thing because they constantly rely on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivators. For example, a conditioned child may find it very difficult to make a choice between two positive or pleasurable options since neither is bad in itself and both seem to give pleasure and happiness. For example, a child may find it easy to decide between doing and not doing their homework but may find it more difficult to decide whether to play games on the play station with his friends or go out and play football in the park.

Here are a few tips given by a psychologist that I found to be useful for using rewards effectively on children and teenagers:

1) Rewards must be desired. Giving a kid chocolates won't work for very long. The reward must be attractive and must be something the child is interested in. I remember when I was young, I was crazy about G.I. Joe action figures. My grandmother told me that if I developed my skill of drawing I would get an action figure. Every drawing I did would be judged by her and I would be awarded a certain number of points based on its quality. Once I had 100 points I would get an action figure. I remember drawing at any and every free moment I could find. It had me hooked and it was not because of my love for drawing. I couldn't and still can't draw even a stick figure very well but I remember trying my best at drawing just for that reward.

2) The goals mustn't be unrealistic. If the child feels that they cannot achieve the goal, they won't try. A general rule of thumb is that the child should be able to earn the reward about 75% of the time.

3) Rewards should be given regularly and consistently. Instead of offering one big reward for straight A's, try offering smaller rewards for each completed homework assignment. Children can't plan for the future in the

same way adults do, and a report card that's three months away might as well not exist.

4) Always follow through. If you promise a reward, and don't follow through, you've just made your life much more difficult. Next time you promise a reward, your child won't believe you. Why should they? That being said, this goes both ways. If your child doesn't earn the reward they don't get it!

5) Be clear about the requirements to receive a reward. It's likely that your idea of a clean room is different than your child's idea of a clean room. Be specific, like this: "If you pick your clothes up off the floor and put them in the dresser, vacuum, and make your bed, we will go to a movie."

6) Be clear about the reward itself. If you say: "I will buy you a new pair of shoes if you study for at least one hour every day this week", your child will be in for a sad realization when they try to pick up a pair that costs 800 bucks, and you say "no". Be clear about any limitations on the reward from the start.

7) Don't take away rewards that have already been earned. If your child earns a trip to the movies, and then they get in trouble for something unrelated, don't take away the reward. You can still use punishment, but it should be separate. Taking away rewards can lead to a constant sense of defeat when a child works hard, yet never sees positive outcomes.

8) Try rewarding good habits instead of good outcomes. For example, reward your child if they study for an hour each night, instead of rewarding them for an A on a test.

Now for the other side of this coin: *punishments*. Choosing what is appropriate is an important part of shaping your kids' behaviour. But choosing consequences that are just right for each situation – without being too lax or too severe – is difficult. Appropriate consequences teach children that they're in control of their own behaviour even when the parent's aren't around to notice. They're also tailored to match each child's developmental stage, so the child isn't expected to give more than he/she can deliver.

These kinds of effective consequences can be divided into two categories: natural and logical consequences.

· **Natural Consequences** are things that happen on their own as a result of the child's behaviour. For example, puncturing your basketball means that you don't have a basketball to play with. Forgetting to do your homework means that you're getting a remark in your handbook.

· **Logical Consequences** are steps taken by parents or elders to help children see that choosing poor

behaviours comes with some unpleasant side effects. These aren't punishments because they're not punitive. An example would be having your children go to bed early the evening after they refused to go to bed on time. The consequence is related to the behaviour, and it makes sense for the situation. It's also unpleasant enough that they won't want to suffer the same consequence over and over again, so it serves as a motivator for changing their own behaviour.

In both cases, one desires that children see that they really choose their consequences themselves the moment they choose their behaviour. This can be done in two ways according to an article in *The Spruce*:

1) Communicating with your kids up front about consequences. What you're going to do when your kids misbehave should never be a mystery. They should have a pretty good idea of what's coming, based on clearly defined family rules. This way, they can see how avoiding the negative behaviour is beneficial to them, because they know up front what it will cost them.

2) Remaining calm when your kids misbehave. When we get angry at our kids for their behaviour, we make the issue about us instead of about them. Doing everything we can to stay calm actually shocks them, which demonstrates the seriousness of the issue. And it also eliminates the power struggle that distracts our kids from focusing on what really initiated the consequence – their own behaviour!❏