

Setting Clear Boundaries

In today's fast paced and busy world, the parent and child relationship is constantly challenged by authority issues. Many parents feel hesitant about using authority and are fearful of "doing it wrong" and damaging the psyche of the child. Yet, a lack of clear family boundaries creates a climate of constant arguing and power struggles. What is a parent to do?

Children crave clear boundaries; without them the world is just too overwhelming. Younger children also crave predictable routines and rituals. By keeping consistent wake-up, meal, and bedtime routines children can recognize and predict the next step. They thrive in an ordered world.

Establishing family ground rules is perhaps the most important way to keep children feeling safe, both physically and emotionally. Having a clear idea of expectations gives children simple, livable ways to make choices. Their success in keeping the boundaries leads to feelings of trustworthiness and love. Family ground rules are a wonderful source of order and unity.

Simple Steps for Setting Family Ground Rules

Involve the children. As a family discuss the core vision or mission of your family. Ask the children to participate by helping to shape the rules and the consequences of breaking them. This will help give them a firm understanding of what the ground rules are and how they apply to their daily routines. Choose a few virtues such as peacefulness, cleanliness, respect and responsibility, which characterize the kind of family you want to be. Be clear about your ground rules by posting them somewhere, such as the refrigerator, where the whole family can see them.

Be moderate. Choose 4 – 6 ground rules that are most important to your family at any one time. Focus on an area of "teach-ability" that matters most at this time. Remember that ground rules can be revised and adjusted as your children grow older and your family circumstances change.

Be specific and be positive. Create ground rules that meet the specific needs of your family. For example you may choose a core value of Peacefulness and create the following boundary: Our home is a peaceful place. We work out conflict by listening with compassion and talking with honesty. We use our voices, not our hands. Using positive language helps to encourage positive behaviour.

Set natural consequences. Always remember the purpose of the ground rules is to call your children to the core value or virtue, like Peacefulness. In the event that a ground rule is broken use natural, relevant consequences. For example if

you forget to be peaceful and hit another child you must stop playing and take a time out. This should be a time to re-establish the missing virtue, Peacefulness, by providing an opportunity to practice this skill. Before the child resumes play ask them “What happened?” and invite the child to come up with a way to make things right with the other person.

Be consistent, be consistent, and be consistent! Recognize that children will test the boundaries, forget the ground rules or just have a bad day. Regardless of the reason for the lapse, trustworthiness requires that the consequences be enforced automatically – justice will prevail and your children will learn that the ground rules are real. When children know that rules are trustworthy, they begin to develop their inner authority, a sense that rules are important and will keep them safe.

More information about this and other valuable tips for setting boundaries can be found in “The Family Virtues Guide” by Linda Kavelin Popov.

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