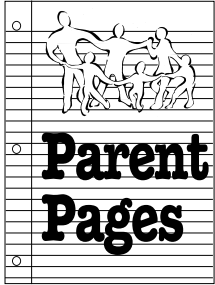


# Rules are Tools for Effective Discipline

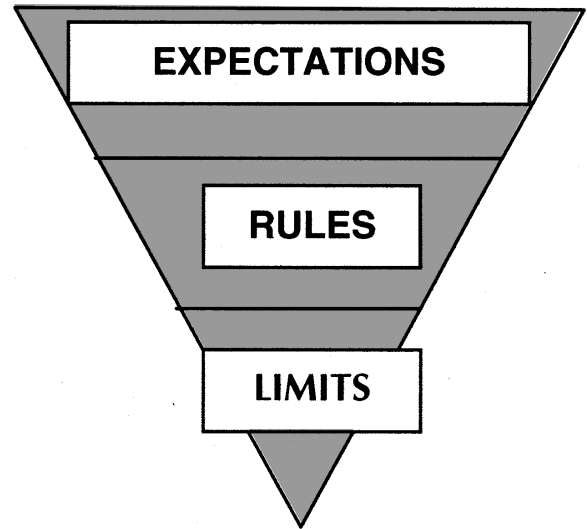


Most adults expect children to follow rules. But not all parents or caregivers give enough thought to what rules are and how to make them. Rules are tools for creating safe, secure environments for children and for teaching them successful ways to behave.

A *rule* is a prescribed guide for conduct or action. Board games, team sports and parliamentary meetings have rules. So do families, classrooms, clubs and other groups where children live, learn and grow. Rules protect the rights of individuals and help them perform their social roles well. They help groups establish order, ensure justice and preserve the common good.

There are other concepts with similar, yet different meanings. A *guideline* is an indication or outline of conduct or policy. It is broad in scope and less specific than a rule. As kids mature and become more responsible, they prefer these broad guidelines for behavior that allow them to define their own rules. A *limit* is something that bounds, restrains or confines. It establishes a maximum or minimum amount, quantity or number. For example, 55 mph is the maximum speed limit and 21 years is the minimum drinking age. When these limits are exceeded or violated, the consequences or penalties may be severe. An *expectation* is something considered probable, reasonable or necessary. Adult expectations are powerful influences on children's behavior and positive expectations that are reachable can help children develop in positive ways.

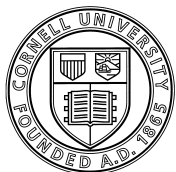
The differences in meaning among these concepts are important for parents, teachers and caregivers. Almost every adult has expectations, rules and limits for children. But expectations are not rules and not all rules define limits. Expecting a child to have good manners is certainly reasonable, but when he eats like a pig at the dinner table, you need to establish some mealtime rules. On the other hand, it may



be reasonable to expect your child to try hard in school, but it is foolish to set rules or limits about academic performance. Telling her that only A's or B's are acceptable (the minimum limit) is counter-productive and ultimately unenforceable (What is the consequence for not getting A's and B's? Keeping her home from school? Changing schools? Taking away unrelated privileges?).

Use an inverted, three-tiered pyramid to visualize how expectations, rules and limits work together to establish adult authority and modify the behavior of children. At the top of the upside-down pyramid are expectations. Adults usually have many expectations for children and must determine which ones are realistic and which ones aren't. Eliminate any expectations that are unrealistic or not in the child's best interest. For example, it is unrealistic to expect young children to perform certain tasks for which they are not physically ready. When children live up to your expectations - they behave in school, they treat others with courtesy, they do their homework - you usually don't have to establish a rule regarding that behavior.

~Continued~



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When children fail to meet your reasonable expectations, it may be necessary to make a rule to regulate the undesirable behavior and promote the desirable or expected behavior. Rules fit into the middle level of our pyramid. For example, you expect your daughter to do her homework every day. When you receive reports that she is not completing her assignments, you may reiterate your expectations and discuss some options with her. You may give her choices, like doing homework before or after dinner. When that fails to change her behavior, you may establish a rule about homework: it must be completed and checked by mom or dad before dinner.

Adults find that when rules fail, or in instances when inappropriate behavior is potentially dangerous, they must establish a limit on that behavior. For example, you may have a rule for a toddler about not touching the stove. When you see him moving toward the stove, you must clearly establish this as off-limits to protect him from harm. Likewise, parents may set limits on alcohol use for their young adults. In one family, it may be okay to drink responsibly, but drinking and driving are absolutely forbidden. In another family, drinking alcohol is limited to family functions during the holidays. In a third family, all alcohol use is prohibited until the young adult reaches legal drinking age.

Limits occupy the bottom, smallest slice of the pyramid. In most families there are more expectations (spoken and unspoken) than rules, and more rules than limits. Remember, limits establish a bottom or outer line that cannot be crossed. Establishing too many limits, especially ones that are arbitrary or do not protect the welfare of the child, leaves parents vulnerable to defiant or rebellious behavior. If children begin to test all limits, they expose themselves to potentially unsafe conditions. Adults are advised to create a few, rational limits that essentially protect children from potential harm or injury.

Rules and limits are essential in any group setting - and families are no exception. Young children and school-age children seem to thrive when rules are explicit and enforced. Rules are one way children learn how things work and how people behave. They give children a sense of security and safety that is essential to positive development. Rules provide a sense of order and a frame of reference in their rapidly expanding and changing world.

Rules must be useful. They help adults and children create a structured setting that supports individual development and group interaction. Rules help children learn social norms and acquire socially acceptable behavior. Rules help children learn how to perform successfully in the world.

Whenever possible, have children involved in determining rules and consequences. This does not mean that abdicating adult authority, but a democratic parent or teacher seeks the input of children before setting rules. When children have a say in family or group rules, they feel greater responsibility for the group. In many daily experiences, like games and play activities, children can be guided to make and abide by their own rules.

Rules are tools for parents and other adults who live and work with children. They foster a child's development by providing safety, stability and security and they help children learn socially and morally acceptable ways to behave.

*Source: Timothy Jabn, Human Development Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.*

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