# Setting Rules Your Family Can Live By

Rules provide the foundation that children need for healthy emotional development. They are the guidelines that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and help children feel secure in their world. They also help to make life more enjoyable for everyone!

**Tips for Setting Rules for Children**

**Acknowledge and reward good behaviour.** Generally speaking, reward for good behaviour is more effective than punishment. Children like attention. Try to give as much attention to good behaviour as you do to bad. Reward children with hugs, smiles, general praise or special treats when they follow the rules.

**Set rules and consequences together.** Kids need to understand that their actions have consequences. They need to understand both the rules, and the consequences they will face if these are not followed. It can be helpful to gently remind younger children of the agreed consequence when you remind them of the rules. For example, before they go into the garden, remind them that they will have to come inside if they throw dirt or sand.

**Set clear and simple rules for younger children.** Keep the rules short and simple with easily understandable consequences. For example, you might tell your child to put his/her toys away each afternoon before they can watch TV.

**Set specific rules and limits.** Be clear about your expectations. Define the limits of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. For example, when you tell children not to stay out late, you are inviting miscommunication. Instead, clearly tell your children the time that you expect them to be home.

**Be firm and consistent.** Children need to know that your rules will remain constant, along with the consequences. By enforcing penalties when children test you, you will reinforce the rules and teach your children to respect them.

**Don't demand perfection.** Like the rest of us, kids will sometimes slip up, even when they are trying to follow the rules. If a child loads the dishwasher but leaves out one glass, don't make a big deal of it. Praise the child for the effort. However, if the child consistently leaves out glasses, it's time for a chat!

**Communicate unconditional love.** Tell your children that you may not always like their behaviour, but that you will always love and support them as a person.

**Getting Family Agreement**

The more the whole family can be involved in setting the rules, the greater the chances are that the rules will be followed.

Consider:

- Holding a family meeting. Decide what things are important to you all as a family. What behaviour could negatively affect your well-being or disturb your happiness? Your list might include things like consideration, respect, politeness, knowing where family members are at all times or help with chores.
- Developing rules based on the things that matter to you as a family.
- Agreeing on consequences for broken rules.
- Setting rewards for great behaviour. Depending on the age of your children, you might agree to award stars or beads to family members who follow all the rules or categories of rules each week. When a pre-determined number of stars have been reached, it's reward time!

**When a Child Acts Out**

Accept that all children are human and none are perfect. All children act out sometimes. If it is an occasional occurrence, deal with the incident and move on.

If a child is consistently breaking rules and generally acting out, it is time to talk. Consider what may be behind the bad behaviour. Acting out is often a call for help or attention. Is the child having problems at school or with friends? Are there conflicts or problems in the home that he or she may be reacting to? Is the expectation too high, could the goal be broken down into smaller tasks to eventually reach the desired behaviour?

If behaviour problems persist, it may be time to seek outside help. You may also want to talk to your child's guidance counsellor at school to see if the problems are also happening at school, and/or talk to your child's doctor about possible next steps.

- Sit down and talk with your child. Ask if the child is unhappy or upset about something. Let your child talk. Listen, listen, listen! You will learn more by listening than you will ever learn by talking.

- Many children who act out are suffering low self-esteem. Find every opportunity to praise your child's good behaviour or efforts. Reinforce what a terrific person the child is.

- Your child may need a little extra, focused time with your partner or with you. This can often be the case in families with several children. Try to make sure that when you are with your child, you really focus on him or her and actively listen to what they are saying.

- If a child consistently breaks certain rules, remind him or her of the negative effects on you. Tell your child that when laundry is just thrown onto the laundry room floor, you have to pick each item up and it hurts your back. Most children do not really want their parents to suffer from their actions.