

## ESTABLISHING RULES

National Network for Child Care's [Connections Newsletter](#)

Christine M. Todd, Ph. D.  
Child Development Specialist  
Human Development and Family Studies  
University of Illinois Cooperative Extension

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Making children feel welcome in the child care setting is especially important as you begin the new year. It is equally important to help them understand the rules they must live by.

Children find great comfort in rules. Sometimes they will actually misbehave to force adults to show them where the boundaries are. Set clear expectations for children when they arrive, and you will prevent some misbehavior from occurring.

Here are some principles to follow when establishing rules.

**RULES SHOULD BE NECESSARY.** The goal is to have as few rules as possible. It is hard for children to remember many rules. And school-age children will rebel if there is a rule for everything. Before the first class session, look over your room. Are there any changes you could make so you would need fewer rules? Perhaps room dividers would eliminate the need for a "No running in the room" rule. Maybe you will need to buy more markers or Leggos so you won't have to spend so much time teaching children to share or wait their turn. It is important to help children learn both these concepts. There will still be plenty of occasions, though, to teach these ideas without children constantly fighting over limited materials and supplies. Label shelves with pictures or words telling where the toys and supplies go. This will help children return things to their proper places more easily. By carefully arranging the environment, you can avoid the need for some rules.

**RULES SHOULD BE REALISTIC.** Select rules that the children have the ability to follow. A rule such as "No talking in line" will be very difficult for most children to follow. Why establish a rule you know they will break? A more reasonable rule would be "Talk softly in line."

**RULES SHOULD BE POSITIVE IN NATURE.** The purpose of rules is to help children act correctly. Therefore, the best rules will tell children what to do rather than what not to do. A rule such as "Don't leave games on the table" tells the children nothing about what they should do with the games. In contrast, a rule such as "Put games on the shelf when you are done" lets children know exactly what is expected of them.

**RULES SHOULD BE UNDERSTANDABLE.** Be sure to use words that children understand. Older school-age children may understand rules such as "Respect property." However, kindergarten students and first- and second-graders may have no idea what you mean by these words. "Respect" is an abstract concept that is difficult for younger children to understand. Similarly, many younger children will not understand that "property" can refer to the possessions of others, materials, and supplies, even the couch in the quiet corner. Because this rule covers so many different situations, you may still wish to use it. However, be sure to discuss what the words mean. Use many concrete examples that even young children will understand.

**CHILDREN SHOULD UNDERSTAND THE REASONS FOR RULES.** It is possible for you to "control" children's behavior through rules. But the real goal is to help children develop self-control. Children should not follow rules because they are hoping for a reward or because they are afraid of a punishment. Rather, they should follow rules because they believe in the rules. When adults explain why rules are important, children are more likely to develop self-control. They are also more sensitive to the needs of others.

School-age children understand the world in terms of their own past experiences. Asking children to draw a picture or talk about a time when someone called them a name or hit them will help them better understand why a rule is important. Older children will also benefit from discussions of what will be expected of them as adults. Have they ever seen two adults fighting on the playground? No. Adults are not allowed to hit one another. Have they ever seen their parents butt in line ahead of someone at the grocery store? Of course not. Adults don't do those sorts of things. Older children want to be more like adults. Help them understand what the standards are for grown-ups.

**RULES SHOULD BE ENFORCED CONSISTENTLY.** Of all the "rules" about rules, this is probably the most important. Children find great comfort in predictability. Establish clear consequences for breaking the rules and always enforce them. However, don't expect children to automatically accept the rule or the consequence for breaking the rule. That is not the nature of school-age children. They may argue about the rule or stomp off in a huff. If you calmly enforce the rule in spite of their defiance, you are helping them learn what is expected of them.

It is especially important to enforce rules consistently during the beginning of the year. In our efforts to establish warm relationships with children, we are often tempted to "bend" the rules during the first few weeks. Instead of promoting strong relationships, this actually leads to more misbehavior. It also weakens our relationship with the children. Failing to enforce rules is confusing for children. It sends the message that they can't trust what you say. When you consistently enforce the rules, using a calm, solution-oriented manner, children will act appropriately.

When a problem does arise, ask children to explain what happened. Then ask them to identify the rule they broke. Ask them why the rule is important. Also ask them to tell you several acceptable things they could have done. For example, in response to a hitting episode on the playground you might have the following dialogue.

"What happened?"

"Jerry was bothering me on the playground."

"What did you do?"

"He kept bothering me, so I hit him."

"Are you allowed to hit here?"

"No."

"What is the rule that we have about hitting?"

"We aren't allowed to hurt other people."

"Why is it important that we not hit other people?"

"Because they could get hurt, because adults aren't allowed to hit others, because other people won't like us."

"If someone is bothering you on the playground, what could you do besides hitting them?"

"Walk away, ask them to stop, tell a teacher."

Then, ask the child to identify the consequence for breaking the rule and request that they follow the consequence.

For example, you might say, "What happens here when people hit?"

"They have to have a 15 minute time-out."

"OK, let me know when you are done with your 15 minutes."

Children need to understand what is expected of them. This will happen if you establish effective rules, help children understand why they are important, and consistently enforce them.

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