

Quirky Discipline Rules That Work

By Barbara Rowley

I've made a lot of bad rules in the decade I've been a mom, from irrational threats ("No graham crackers in the house ever again if you eat them in the living room even one more time") to forbidding human nature ("You may not fight with your sister"). But occasionally I've come up with rules that work better than I'd ever contemplated. These made-up rules have an internal logic that defies easy categorization, but their clarity and enforceability make them work. Several of them are not, technically, rules at all, but declarations of policy or fact. And they're all easy to remember. A few personal favorites, plus those of other moms:

Rule #1: You can't be in the room when I'm working unless you work, too

Goal: Get your child to help, or stop bugging you, while you do chores

It might seem odd, but I don't mind doing laundry, cleaning floors or really any kind of housework. But I do mind my kids, oblivious to the fact that my arms are full of their underwear, asking me to find their missing doll shoe or do a puzzle with them. Until recently, this was a source of great frustration, especially when our household grew to five kids when my husband, Taylor, and I became temporary foster parents for two months.

I tried to explain to my expanded brood that if they helped me fold laundry, we could do something together sooner. But they knew I'd be available anyway if I finished folding myself, so the argument wasn't compelling.

And then one day, as my oldest foster daughter sat and watched me work, asking me favors and waiting for me to be done, I came up with a rule that takes into account two important facts about kids:

- They actually want to be with you as much as possible.
- You can't force them to help you in any way that is truly helpful.

I played fact one against fact two and told her that she didn't have to help me but couldn't just sit and watch. She had to go elsewhere. Given a choice between being with me and folding laundry or not being with me at all, she took option one.

Why it works: I didn't care which she chose. And it was her choice, so it gave her control even as it took it away.

Rule #2: I don't work past 8 p.m.

Goal: Regular bedtimes and time off for you

You can't just announce a rule to your husband and kids that says, "Bedtime has to go really smoothly so I can get a break at the end of the day." It won't happen. But if you flip the problem and make a rule about you instead of telling everyone what they have to do, it all falls neatly—and miraculously—into place.

When this occurred to me, back when my oldest was 6 and my youngest was nearly 2, I announced to Anna and Taylor that the U.S. Department of Labor had just created a new rule and I was no longer allowed to do any kind of mom jobs past 8:00 in the evening. I would gladly read books, play games, listen to stories of everyone's day or give baths—the whole mother package—before then. Then I held firm—I acted as if it were out of my hands. Sort of like Cinderella and midnight.

Suddenly, my 6-year-old (and my husband) developed a new consciousness of time. My daughter actually rushed to get ready for bed just after dinner so that we could have lots of books and time together before I was "off." My husband, realizing that if things dragged past 8:00 he'd have to face putting both girls to sleep himself, became more helpful. Anna's now 11, and my hours have been extended, but the idea that I'm not endlessly available has been preserved and integrated into our family routine.

Why it works: You're not telling anyone else what to do. The rule is for you, so you have only yourself to blame if it's not enforced.

Rule #3: You get what you get, and you don't throw a fit

Goal: No more haggling—over which pretzel has more salt or who gets their milk in the prized red cup and who in the cursed green, or which cast member of Blue's Clues adorns whose paper plate

My friend Joyce, director of our town's preschool, told us about this terrific rule, now repeated by everyone I know on playgrounds and at home. Not only does it have a boppy rhythm that makes it fun to say, but it does good old "Life isn't fair" one better by spelling out both the essential truth of life's arbitrary inequities and the only acceptable response to the world's unfairness: You don't throw a fit.

When I first heard this, I was skeptical. It seemed too simple. But to my utter surprise, not only did it do the trick but kids seemed to rally around it almost with relief. They must have seen that if it applied to them today it might apply to someone else tomorrow.

Why it works: It's irrefutable—it almost has the ring of runic or prehistoric truth to it—and rather than focusing on an abstract notion like "fairness," it speaks directly to the situation at hand.

Rule #4: Take that show on the road

Goal: Peace and quiet

Is it just me or does someone saying "one-strawberry, two-strawberry, three-strawberry" over and over in a squeaky voice make you want to smash some strawberries into a pulpy mess? I want my kids to be gleefully noisy when they need and want to be. But I don't feel it's necessary that I be their audience/victim past a few minutes or so, or that I should have to talk (shout?) over their, um, joyous clamor when I'm on the phone. So once I've shown attention adequate to their display, I tell them that they're free to sing, bang, chant or caterwaul to their hearts' content, just not here. The same goes for whining, tantrums and generic pouting.

For the irrational and long-winded whining jags sometimes used by her 4-year-old son, my friend Denise has turned this rule to a pithy declaration: "I'm ready to listen when you're ready to talk." She then leaves the room.

Why it works: It gives children a choice rather than a prohibition and does so without rejecting them.

Rule #5: We don't argue about money

Goal: Short-circuit begging and pleading for stuff

This rule has to be enforced consistently to work, but the basic deal is that you can tell your child yes or no on any requested purchase, but you don't discuss it. If your child protests, simply repeat, calmly, like a mantra, that you won't argue about money. The key to success is that you have to have the courage of your convictions and not argue. Thus the calm repetition.

It cuts both ways, though: When your kids want to spend their "own" money, point out potential mistakes and give advice on the purchase if you'd like, but at the end of the day, don't overrule them unless it's a matter of health or safety. After all, you don't argue about money. They may make some bad choices, but they'll learn. And you'll all enjoy shopping together a lot more.

Why it works: It shifts the focus from the whined-for treat to financial policy. You're almost changing the topic on them, no longer debating why they should or shouldn't have gum or some plastic plaything and, instead, invoking a reasonable-sounding family value.

Rule #6: I can't understand you when you speak like that

Goal: Stopping whining, screaming and general rudeness

This one requires almost religious consistency of application to work effectively. But, essentially, you simply proclaim incomprehension when your child orders (rather than asks) you to do something, whines or otherwise speaks to you in a way you don't like. Whispering this helps; it takes the whole thing

down a notch on the carrying-on scale. This is a de-escalation tool, so calmly repeat the rule a few times and don't get lured into raising your voice. A child who's whining or being rude is clearly seeking attention and drama, so use this as a way to provide neither.

Why it works: It empowers your child by suggesting he has something valuable to say (if he says it nicely) and allows you to completely invalidate (i.e., ignore) the rude presentation.

Rule #7: There's no such thing as boredom

Goal: Prevent your child from saying "I'm bored"; teach her to entertain herself

A friend of mine says this is one of the few things he got right with his kids. The first time his older daughter claimed she was bored he simply denied that the thing existed. Now he sometimes adds: "There's no such thing as boredom, only failure of the imagination" or "...only mental laziness." Surprisingly he's never gotten the "There is too boredom!" argument, only an exasperated "Da-ad." Regardless of the phrasing, the result is the same: The burden of amusement lands directly on your child, which is precisely where you want it.

Why it works: By the time your kids have figured out the puzzle of how something that exists can also not exist, they won't be bored. Also, it changes the terms of debate, from a challenge for you (list all my toys, then cave in and let me watch TV) to one for them. Besides—if your child learns how to entertain herself, there truly is no such thing as boredom. And that's a gift that will last all her life.

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