

Child Care plus+

+ Rules, Rules, and Less Rules

Effective rules in early childhood programs must be grounded in a clear understanding of child development so expectations are appropriate for the ages and stages of participating children. Age-appropriate rules establish boundaries for children's behavior—ultimately supporting their emerging ability to understand limits and use self-control. Second, effective program rules reflect the teacher/caregiver's individual preferences and overall philosophy of child guidance. The program climate and every adult/child interaction in the program will be guided by the rules the program adopts.



Clearly, program rules play a significant role in day-to-day experiences for young children and their teachers/caregivers. You can develop program rules that effectively support everyone when you start with 1) self-reflection about your own needs, 2) clear boundaries for enforcement, and 3) plans to engage the children.

1 Self-reflection is an important part of developing rules you and your group can live with long-term. Within the boundaries established by your knowledge of child development, identifying what is important to you helps you establish rules that achieve your goals.

2 A key element of rule-setting is serious consideration of what should be done and what should never be done in terms of enforcement of rules. This is critical to planning and promoting consistency across staff.

3 Because everyone is expected to *follow* the rules, it is important that everyone be involved in *setting* the rules, including the children. No one should be surprised to hear about one of the program rules. Making up the rules as you go along creates confusion, misunderstanding, and resentment.

Limit your list of rules to a few of the most important ones. Young children are unable to read—let alone remember—a long list of rules. A few significant rules stand a better chance of being learned and remembered. Setting only two or three rules means the rules serve as guiding principles on which to base decision-making about specific behavior.

Your choice of rules depends on the ages of children in your group and your program philosophy. Common rules in early childhood settings often address the following, using few words and simple language:

- Taking good care of yourself (avoiding danger and staying safe).
- Taking good care of others (respecting the rights of other children and adults in the group).
- Taking good care of our school/program or classroom (the shared environment: toys, materials, furnishings).

Effective rules are stated positively and teach children about limits and expectations. Rules guide children and adults in your program or group in defining what is acceptable and what is not, no matter what the situation. Rules that are clearly identified and implemented consistently throughout your program are a valuable part of guiding children's behavior. Rules help children develop self-control—now and in the future—within boundaries you define and limits children themselves help set. + CC+

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+ IN FOCUS

Young children and children with special needs are more likely to be able to learn to follow the rules in your program when:

- ◆ they help set the rules. In whatever way is developmentally appropriate, involve the child in the group while you are setting the rules.
- ◆ there are not too many rules. Too many rules is confusing and creates a stressful environment.
- ◆ multiple strategies are used to help each child understand and learn to follow the rules. Encouragement for compliance, gentle reminders, and modeling build success over time.
- ◆ there is consistency about applying the rules. Consistency cannot be overstated; if a rule cannot be consistently applied, it should be eliminated or changed (with the group input, of course).
- ◆ when the environment makes it easy to follow the rules. For example, when toy shelves are labeled and uncrowded, clean-up materials are on hand, and coat hooks are reachable, children can easily put away their toys, clean up their spills, and hang up their coats.
- ◆ you get input from parents and early intervention specialists and therapists, as needed. It will be easier for you to elicit their help when you are clear about the rules to start with and have already established a solid foundation using these guidelines. + CC+

+ TRY IT OUT

A number of providers use the simple process below to involve young children in setting program rules together.

- ✓ Depending on the interest of the group, meet several times. Introduce each of the key areas of taking good care of 1) yourself, 2) others, and 3) our school.
- ✓ Talk about the reasons for setting rules. When you introduce the idea, you might say "there are six children in our group, what should we do to keep ourselves safe?" At another meeting you might gesture around the room and comment that "there are a lot of fun toys in our room, what rules will help make sure we can find what we need and everyone can play?"
- ✓ Help children clarify their ideas, group them under one of the three areas, and write them down.
- ✓ Post the rules so everyone can refer to them. Developing a symbol or icon for each rule can help some children refer to the list in a meaningful way.
- ✓ Consistently use the same language as the posted rules. Say "Ben, take care of yourself. Sit on the swing." Or walk with a child to the posted rules and say "look, you took good care of your school! You put the lids back on all of the markers you used.
- ✓ When one of the rules does not seem to be working, get children's ideas about what should be done.

If you have never engaged children in this process, you may wish to try it out as an experiment and see whether it makes a difference. + CC+

+ CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

It may be an interesting experiment for you to ask several parents of children enrolled in your program to make a quick list of your program's rules for guiding their children's behavior while they are with you. If that list is in any way different from your actual list of rules, you have some work to do!

The rules you create can only be effective when everyone involved with the program knows what they are. How can anyone follow the rule if they don't know what it is or are unsure of exactly what it means? If "take care of our program" means to sit in the chairs and not on the tables, then no one, absolutely no one, not a teacher or a parent or a child should ever be found sitting on the tables without being reminded of the rule.

How do parents come to know your program rules? It is possible their children may be able to tell them if they actively participated in setting the rules and are regularly taught to follow them. Many programs make a poster of the rules to be hung in the parent area. Others include the rules in a parent newsletter or flier. If you include the guiding principles you use to help the children in setting the rules together in your parent handbook, the list should not be so specific that it indicates that you are setting the rules and imposing them on the children. + CC+

+ PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Here are suggestions to guide you in identifying and using rules in your program or group.

- ▶ Rules in an early childhood program need to make sense to the children enrolled there. If a rule does not make sense, it is unlikely that children will consistently follow it.
- ▶ Once rules are set, they may need to be modified or simplified based on your observations and children's feedback. For example, rules defining the number of children who may play in a given area are often ignored when children are calmly playing together; their overwhelming desire to play overcomes their immature ability to count the number of children and act accordingly. In this situation, changing or adding to the original rule may be appropriate. When a rule needs to be changed, everyone who identified the rules in the first place should again be involved.
- ▶ Stating rules positively helps children learn about appropriate behaviors and sets up a nurturing environment. *Be safe, walk inside* tells children what to do and why. In contrast, *don't run* simply states what is not acceptable and fails to describe what is appropriate. In fact, children may focus on the word "run" and inappropriate behavior will continue!
- ▶ Rules work best when worded in short, positive phrases. Create phrases that can be easily repeated over and over again by both caregivers and children.
- ▶ The most effective rules are the ones that you expect to be followed consistently. If you can imagine a situation when it would be appropriate not to follow the rule, then it is not a good rule.
- ▶ Take time to teach each rule to staff, children, and families. When everyone understands the rules, it is likely that they will be useful. Use creative, enjoyable strategies such as puppets, books, role-playing, and storytelling to help young children truly understand expectations and the reasons for your rules.
- ▶ Your rules are working when you do not have to continually remind children and adults about following them. It may be necessary to revisit the rules when new children enter the program, but constant reminders are signs that a rule is not well understood or

that it is not working in your setting. You may need to decide if a particular rule is still important or modify your approach to make sure everyone understands what is expected.

- ▶ Plan to evaluate the rules regularly. What seemed appropriate months ago may not be as important now. It is important to periodically evaluate the rules you have set up in your program to see if everyone still believes they are appropriate.

The following example illustrates these suggestions in action:

In Catherine's classroom, one of the rules is: We take our shoes off before coming inside our room. An area in the entry way had been designated for removing and storing shoes, and the expectation was that everyone would take off their shoes before entering the room and put on slippers. The children quickly learned to follow this rule, as did Catherine and the assistant teachers, but parents frequently "forgot," were not told or were in a hurry and did not have time to take their shoes off. Visitors often entered the building without taking their shoes off because they did not know the rule or that it applied to them. It was hard to know that "take your shoes off" was a rule because it was not consistently implemented.

Catherine met with families to explain why she felt this was an important rule. She highlighted three reasons: keeping the carpet clean was a high priority because many of the children in her class spent lots of time playing on the floor; having the carpet professionally cleaned more frequently would be a financial drain on the program; and wearing slippers added to the relaxed tone in the program and made it feel cozy. Together, they decided that it was an important rule, and they came up with concrete strategies to help everyone know about and follow this rule. A sign posted in the entry described the "take your shoes off" rule, an adult-sized chair made it easier to take off shoes, and Catherine agreed to remind parents and visitors to take off their shoes before they entered the play space.

Setting and following rules is a lifelong learning process. Starting this process in early childhood can help children learn to govern their own behavior. + CC+

+ QUESTION

QUESTION: *We have a lot of rules in my program, and I would really like to make changes. How can I guide the children in this process?*

ANSWER: As you and the children set rules together, let the following questions serve as a guide:

- Are the guidelines minimal and tell children what to do rather than what not to do? When a rule is stated as what to do, children internalize the rule more quickly. If your program rules seem to go on and on, they may be too wordy or you may have set too many rules.
- Do the rules make sense to someone who was not involved in setting them? If they do not, they will eventually lose their sense to you as well. Make sure they say what is meant to start with.
- Is this a rule that every teacher/caregiver in the program can consistently teach and implement? Meet with the other adults in your program to make sure they are consistently teaching and enforcing the rules.
- Does this rule make sense in the other settings where these children spend their time? Young children are just learning to regulate their own behavior. Rules that apply across many environments are more likely to result in frequent and cheerful compliance.
- Do the rules promote learning that will be useful across a lifetime? Meaningful rules serve as guidelines for children to use as they learn appropriate behavior both now and in the future. A child's emerging self-control and independence are fostered when rules are grounded in principles that can be applied throughout his or her life.

- Are the rules reasonable for each child? Consider whether implementing the rule fosters positive behavior in children or is too demanding for someone in the group. While there may be a few exceptions, these questions tend to help eke out the most important and effective rules for an early childhood program. + CC+

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

To deepen your understanding of setting rules with young children, visit NAEYC's web site "Beyond the Journal" at <http://journal.naeyc.org/btj/200307>. This web site includes a collection of featured articles and resources from *Young Children* magazine. "Democratic Discipline in Your Classroom: A Roadmap for Beginners" focuses on older children. "Love and Learn: Positive Guidance for Young Children" addresses guidance for children at multiple age levels. +

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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CHILD CARE plus+: The Center on Inclusion in Early Childhood

The University of Montana Rural Institute, 634 Eddy Avenue
Missoula, MT 59812-6696

1-800-235-4122 (406) 243-6355

www.ccplus.org ccplus@ruralinstitute.umd.edu

EDITORIAL BOARD: Sandra Marris; Susan Harper-Whalen; Karen Martin; Sara Leishman.

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Rural Institute on Disabilities
The University of Montana
634 Eddy Avenue
Missoula, MT 59812-6696

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