

Session 3 – Home Activity - Using Household rules or Family agreement

Household rules are an important aspect of setting limits on children's behaviour and parent's too.

Routine chores such as putting dirty clothes in the washing machine might be included. The rules might state for example, not having snacks before dinner, or that the family eat together four nights per week.

Having the rules written down can be helpful because it discourages arguments in the family. The rules should be negotiated with older children so they feel they are fair and reasonable, and feel they are included in the process.

Too little or too many rules can cause problems. Some parents who have too few standards or rules may feel guilty about enforcing them.

For example: "He wanted sweets before dinner because he was hungry so I felt I had to give him something, then he doesn't eat his meal!" or "He wouldn't eat what I made for him so to stop him being unhappy, I gave him what he likes – crisps and a coke"

Too many rules can lead to problems and too authoritarian parents can have children with behaviour problems – they give out so many commands that children are overloaded so they cannot comply.

Parents who use commands too frequently are not able to follow through with their commands. This gives a mixed message – sometimes they mean it and sometimes they don't so children stop trying to comply with the commands.

Children feel secure in a world where the limits in their behaviour are reasonable, predictable and consistently enforced. Learning how to use family rules effectively will improve the quality of family life, enhance the adult-child relationship, prevent inappropriate behaviour and encourage children to be responsible members of the family.

It is important to remember that all children will test the rules. This is normal behaviour. Younger children will cry or tantrum, and older children will argue or protest. Children test the rules not only to express their individuality, but also to see if their parents really mean it. Only consistent consequences for misbehaviour on the part of the parents will teach children that good behaviour is expected. If parents have been inconsistent in the past, then the children will protest and the noncompliance will get worse. Children learn by experience that if they protest long and hard enough their parents will give in.

Making the Agreement

Take some time to think about the rules you want to make that are unbreakable. Don't make too many and choose the most important ones for your family (no more than 8). Involve the children in the process and get all the family members to sign up to them. Some examples might include:

Mum will get help with the supermarket shopping.

We will plan an enjoyable activity programme.

We will eat together at least 3 times per week.

Johnny will be given a choice of what he takes in his packed lunch.

Always be liberal with praise when your child is compliant. Tell them how well they are doing. Be careful not to be sarcastic, for example "You did well today, why can't you do that every day?" If statements from parents have a critical element, the child will feel resentful and will be less motivated to comply next time.

Some tips to help compliance:

The when/then rule:

When we have done our exercise for today, then we will have a snack.

When you come home from football, then you can have television time.

When you put your bike away, then you can watch TV.

Don't use stop commands:

For example, "Stop eating that rubbish at school!" Turn it around to use a positive statement using "do" commands instead – "Take some fruit with you to school for a snack".

Give children options whenever possible, for example "Do you want lettuce or tomato with your sandwich?" Give warnings and helpful reminders.

For example, "It will be time to stop TV and do ... in 2 minutes"

Now get together and make up your family agreement for next session!

Making the agreement work

Keep calm yourself and stay in control.

Use the ignoring technique.

Giving attention to behaviour is a powerful reinforcer - it happens again!

Even negative attention is better than no attention to a child.

When a child is doing something you do not want, it is essential to withhold all forms of attention i.e. totally ignore the behaviour, which means: ◦ No eye contact ◦ No talking ◦ No physical contact

This can be difficult as children are experts at getting our attention. They will cry, scream, temper tantrum, whine and throw things. It is essential to ignore the child during these outbursts.

Distraction can stop the behaviour happening if you get in early before they become frustrated.

The best way of preventing misbehaviour is to praise good behaviour; it's better to give attention to a child for good eating habits than to go on about their bad eating habits.

The Family Agreement