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Children need routines that are predictable. They need to know what the rules and expectations are so they know how to follow them. They also need to know what the consequences will be when they chose to break a rule. Predictability fosters security and feelings of safety.

When a parent is not consistent the child learns that there are gaps, holes, where the parent is not solid. It is in these holes that power struggles grow. By nature a child tests the limits of their world. If the rule holds each time they test it, they are less likely to continue to try to break it. Over time they learn from the unpleasant experience of their consequences. Therefore, it is very important for parents to be clear about their boundaries and get help if there are gaps in the structure. Children fall through the gaps and parenting becomes a constant struggle.

What are the rules in your house?

What is important to you?

Where do you find yourself battling with your children?

Where do your children have control and why?

Do you teach your children manners? Are they expected to say please, thank you, open doors for others, chew with their mouths closed, excuse themselves when they pass within someone else's personal space?

What kind of social skills are you teaching your children? Do they look someone in the eye when they are talking to them, or is this considered rude? Do they say hello when meeting someone, or wait to be acknowledged? What is expected from them in social interactions? How are they the same or different with family, strangers or a boss?

How do you talk to your children, and how do they talk to you? Is there a respectful tone of voice used in everyday conversations?

Do you allow your children to get away with being rude? If so, why?

Children are doing the job of learning how to function in the world. What they learn about responsibility in their childhoods will greatly affect how successful they are as adults.

The following is a brief summary of some important points to remember:

1. Define the rules- take time out to consider what a typical day in your home is like. Separate out the behaviors that you want more of and those that you'd like to eliminate or decrease. Keep the rules simple and clear. Common problems are sibling rivalry, chores and checking in. Examples for clear rules are: "We don't hit one another ever!" Or "Your room is clean when the bed is made and all the clothes are put away." Or "It is my responsibility as a parent to know where you are at all times. If you want to go from J's house to P's house, then you call me and ask."
2. Explain the Limits- Be concrete in terms of time, space and behavior. First, tell your child exactly what you expect. "At the grocery store, I expect you to be a helper with the groceries. You can retrieve things from the shelves that I ask for, not whatever you want." Or "At the grocery store, I expect you to sit in the cart while I shop. We will pick out one item especially for you at the end of our shopping trip." If the rule has a time frame attached to it, such as having the table before dinner or setting a curfew, be specific about the time and stick to it. Five minutes after 9:00pm is late if 9:00 is the curfew. Third, if you tell your child to stay in a particular area (where you can see them) and they move out of that area, be clear that it is not acceptable to you and there will be a consequence.
3. Consequences- Make all consequences clear and try to tie them to the rule broken. If your child throws the ball in the house and that is against the rules, take the ball away for a set time. Write it down so that you both know how long the ball is off limits-that means even if he/she has a ball game and wants the team to use it. Be sure to use language with the child that is easily understood by them. It is important to show them that it is their choice that brought about the consequence. These are the rules, you broke the rule by doing this, and now this is the consequence. Stay matter of fact. Simply put, the child has the power to choose their behaviors and if they will break the rules or not. Most kids will test the rules to see if they are real or firm. Be prepared.
4. Reinforcement- After the consequence, it's time for reinforcement. Sit with the child in a loving and supportive way, depending on the age. Some children want to be hugged and know they are forgiven with kisses. Others may be ok with a loving pat and a "fresh start" attitude. Go over what happened and the result of the behavior. See if the child can verbalize a "If I could do it over..." plan, or if an apology is needed. Getting into the habit of saying, "I'm sorry" early on may help when the kids get older. Then it is sometimes seen as a weakness to apologize. The important part is to learn from our behavior so that we can change it the next time.
5. Most of all-Be the example-We all make mistakes, show poor judgment and have regrets at times. Teach your children about learning from mistakes and forgiving self and others by your example. We're all only human and will fall short at times. Life is too short and too precious to be scarred with old resentments from past hurts. Live, learn and move on.