

Rules—How to Make Them

Every home needs rules. God gives us rules for our happiness. When we live in harmony with God's law things go much smoother and family life is sweeter. Parents stand in the place of God to their children. And we should remember that God is not arbitrary. His rules make sense. When we set down rules for our children, we should remember Paul's counsel: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and the instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4, NIV). Household rules should be reasonable. God says, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18, NIV). In talking with children, I find that their greatest complaint is: "My Dad, my Mother, won't listen to me." Dr. Haim G. Ginott says: "There is a crucial difference between the old way of imposing restrictions and the new way of setting limits. In the past the teenager's feelings were often ignored. The restrictions were set amidst anger and argument and in a language that invited resistance. In the modern approach, limits are set in a manner that preserves our teenager's self-respect. The limits are neither arbitrary nor capricious. They are anchored in values and aimed at character-building." *Between Parent and Teenager*, p. 150.

The Lawson family were having their monthly family council. They were discussing chores. Chris, age 13, was complaining: "I hate cutting the lawn. Can't you find me some other chores? This weekly job is getting to me." Dad listened attentively and then said, "I could hire someone to cut the lawn and use your allowance. What would you think of that, Chris?" Chris responded, "Thanks, Dad. I need the money." Dad thought for a moment and said, "I'll tell you what we will do, we will have the lawn mower serviced and sharpened and that will make your job easier." "Oh, thanks, Dad. That would help a lot," responded Chris.

Regular family councils are a big help. It provides an outlet for children's feelings and parents need to listen. Of course, parents have the final word. But they should not use the time to lecture their children. Explain to your children that rules are based on family values. Dad asked, "What are some of the values we cherish in our home?" Timothy, age 11 said, "We tell the truth around here." "Good thinking, Timothy," said Dad. Laura added, "We should always do things on time and not be late." The Lawsons were delighted with the children's responses. Mr. Lawson said, "These family councils are invaluable."

Another bit of advice: Don't make rules in the midst of argument or conflict. Rules should be articulated calmly and firmly. The Lawsons decided that the TV regulations should be revised. So Mrs. Lawson typed out a new set of family TV guide lines and taped them to the bottom of the TV set. That night, after dinner, Mr. Lawson called the family together and read the new guide lines for television viewing. They asked for a response from the children. They seemed to accept the new plan quite well but asked some questions for clarification. The guide lines were a great help in managing the family television set.

Family rules should be governed by the ages of the children. Rules for a four-year-old would not usually be appropriate for a 10-year-old. As children mature, rules should be adapted. "Tom, you have demonstrated some very mature thinking and behavior lately. You have used good judgment, so we have decided that you can be trusted to drive the family car to your volley ball practice on Tuesday nights." Children will blossom under this kind of regime.

A household without rules is like an automobile without brakes. God

never intended that parents should act like dictators. The law of kindness should be on their lips.

Sometimes it's wise for parents to bend a little. This shows that they are not inflexible. But, parents should never surrender principle. They must be as firm as a rock, but let your children know that you enjoy seeing them happy. Listen to Dr. Kevin Leman: "Real love means that we are kindly and compassionate, but we are also firm and fair. In fact, we can't have real love for our children without reasonable, healthy limits to guide and to nurture them." *Building Up Kids Without Tearing Them Down*, pp. 60, 61. Again, listen to your children, be kind, but firm.

It is absolutely essential that parents agree on household rules. Children are very adept at manipulating parents who disagree on disciplinary action. When kids get mixed messages they become confused.

Parents are bound to disagree on parenting issues occasionally. They should talk things over and come to an agreement. Parents can always compromise by meeting each other half way. Jerry and Laura disagreed on when their son, Tom, age 11, should do his homework. Laura felt that Tom should have free time to unwind after school. Jerry felt he should do it as soon as he got home. So they sat down to talk. They compromised by allowing Tom a 30-minute unwind-time before doing his homework.

Ernest Jouriles, Ph.D., said that "The child caught in the middle may become anxious and develop problems with sleep, school, or social life." *Good Housekeeping*, July 1995. So, parents get your act together and present a united front to your children.

"Talk to your children as if you had confidence in their intelligence. Deal with them kindly, tenderly, lovingly." *Child Guidance*, p. 33.