

Making Rules that Stick

Chances are you give your child a lot of rules: Sit still! Make your bed! Finish your dinner! Wear the orange shirt today! Brush your teeth! Buckle up!

Setting consistent limits for your child will help him or her feel more calm and secure, and will create a more orderly household. However, it is important to set rules that your child can follow, and to remember that your child will sometimes break the rules. In fact, it is normal for a child to only comply with two-thirds of requests. Here are some tips to help:

Set the Unbreakable Rules

Create a list of five to ten core family rules, and post them where everybody can see. Make sure that these rules are consistently enforced at home by you and other caregivers like babysitters or visiting grandparents. Good ideas for core family rules include: Always wear seat belts; No food in the living room; Hitting is not allowed; Throwing is only allowed outside. Once you have established these as important "always" rules, you'll find yourself having to give fewer commands.

Limit Commands

The average parent gives 17 commands every half hour; that's an almost impossible number for a child to comply with. Focus on giving the truly important commands. "Please help me pick up your blocks," is more important than, "Color the frog green." Pay attention and reinforce compliance with positive praise rather than with repeated commands. For example, follow, "Please pick up your toys," with "You're almost finished!" Also, give only one command at a time and follow compliance with praise. A long string of commands – "Go upstairs, put on your PJs, brush your teeth, say your prayers..." – is too much for a child to remember.

Keep Commands Simple and Realistic

Make sure that your commands are age appropriate. It's appropriate to ask a three-year-old to help put a toy away, but not to go make the bed. Make sure that your commands are clear. Vague statements like "Be nice" set your child up for failure and don't help him or her understand what you are really asking. Instead, say, "Please let Billy play with the blocks with you." Make sure that you give your child time to comply with commands. Wait a few seconds or, better yet, give a warning like, "In two minutes it will be time to clean up."

Be Positive

Change your 'no' and 'stop' commands to 'do' and 'start' commands. "Put away your toy," instead of "Don't leave your toy out." "Please speak with your inside voice," instead of "Stop yelling." These statements are assertive and focus on the exact action you want. Always remember to be positive, polite and respectful.

Follow Through

If you do not follow through with your commands, you can expect them to be ignored. When your child complies with a command, praise him or her for a job well done. Say, "Good job," "Thank you," or "I'm proud of you." If your child fails to comply with a command, follow through with pre-stated consequences. For example, "If you don't pick up your blocks, you'll have to go to time out." Wait five seconds. If five seconds have passed with no action, it is time for time out.

Content is adapted from The Incredible Years: A Trouble-Shooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 2-8 Years by Dr. Carolyn Webster-Stratton.