

FAMILY RULES

**How to resolve problem
behaviours in your family and
keep your sanity!**

Problems of living together

When we live together in a family (or share a flat/house) then we all have to compromise our individual freedoms to some degree. However when the behaviour of one or more individuals completely upsets the rest of the family (e.g. an irresponsible teenager, or really lazy flatmate), something needs to be done in a systematic way. This approach has been shown to be one of the most effective ways of changing the behaviour of such individuals.

In most families, children will have certain habits or behaviours, which irritate their parents, particularly those which interrupt, complicate the family routines, or unnecessarily add to the housework. These can be anything but include, lateness, messy rooms, not putting things away, not going to bed, eating inappropriately etc. The usual strategies of telling, nagging, cajoling or bribing have failed and either these areas are the focus of weekly/daily tension, or the parents give in and just seethe with resentment.

When we have tried to change the person's behaviour and failed, relationships get really strained on both sides, and often both people begin to become more and more unreasonable, and the issue (which in itself may be quite trivial) gets blown completely out of proportion. Friends and advisors may advise us to "sit down and discuss it", but we know only too well that it will lead to a massive argument, where one or both of us will storm off in a huff.

This approach has been shown to successfully resolve such conflicts, and often promote really effective family discussions and [problem-solving for the first time in years. It has been equally effective with children from 5 years to adults of 65 years.

Philosophy of Family Rules

- The Family Rules Approach makes problems such as not cleaning up into a whole family issue, and not just a personal conflict between mother and child, partners, two housemates etc, where the other family members stay out of the dispute then come in later to "sort out the mess!".
- It is an effective way of putting the responsibility for a young person's behaviour within the child's domain (and not giving the adults sole responsibility for making the rules and carrying them out)

- It should be very clear what the rewards are for doing something, but also what the consequences are for not doing it. The person then chooses the reward or the consequence.
- The rewards and consequences should be related to the behaviour and not designed to be punishing (do not “go over the top”). If the reward is very effective, that the consequences are logically “not getting the reward”.
- Children should be involved as equal partners in the planning stage and their views taken into consideration as the rules are negotiated. This is known as empowerment.
- Once the rules have been agreed, then they are carried out without any further negotiation; the discussion stops!
- As a parent, it is important for us to carry out the agreed plan consistently, and to accept our responsibility for this. Sometimes we find this difficult because we have previously acted impulsively and according to our mood at the time. We may find the consequences difficult to apply, as we may worry that our child may not like us as a result!
- We must realise that every unwanted “Don’t!” (e.g. Don’t leave your dirty clothes on the floor!) must have a workable “Do!” (e.g. Put them into the dirty linen basket). Sometimes we realise that we have not thought out a reasonable option and have to make some arrangement to allow things to work.

Setting Family Rules

1. Get everyone in the family to sit together and join in
2. Decide together what the problems are .e.g. bedtimes, mornings, mealtimes, washing up, tidying, school uniform, coming in etc
3. For each problem..... decide what should be done.
These are the Rules. Put each one on the Rule Chart (see below)
4. Decide on an appropriate reward (i.e. what the person will agree to work for)
5. Agree an appropriate consequence(children will be tougher on themselves than you ever would be)
6. Agree on an appropriate time scale (week, month etc) to apply the system, and set a date to meet and discuss the approach again.
7. Enter the agreed actions on the Rules contract and all parties sign up>
8. Apply the system, making sure that everyone knows what their responsibilities are, and carries them out consistently.
9. At the review meeting, carry on with the system, change the system, or decide that it's no longer needed.

Outcomes for families using this approach

- It provides a framework for family conversation. The discussion itself is as important (if not more important) than the rules of behaviour. Many families say that this is the first time they have been able to sit down and discuss family life in a calm, reasonable way.
- In some cases the discussion itself was sufficient (without needing to set up a formal rules arrangement) i.e. the participants have listened to one another, understood where the other person was coming from, realised why they were so upset, seen how unreasonable they had been, etc.
- By going through the process some parents realise that they have been unreasonable in their expectations, or have been treating the child as they had when the child was younger, or not allowing or supporting any alternative acceptable behaviour.
- Children are really attracted to the whole process of empowerment and rule-setting very attractive and find that it's very fair. I have had an example of a mum whose three boys were constantly bickering over playing on the family computer. They had a Family Rules session, decided that it would be switched off if they started arguing. Within a week, this was an independent programme, where the computer would be switched off by the boys themselves if they failed to agree, and did not need any supervision from their mum.
- It is an objective and illuminating way for parents to develop insights into their own behaviour e.g. to realise how inconsistent they are, how their management is governed by their moods, how guilty they are about working etc, how they are constrained by their own parents or in-laws opinions, and how they might be sending out confusing messages to their child by their own behaviour and lack of clarity.

FAMILY RULES PLANNING CHART

THE PROBLEM	What not to do	e.g. - leave a mess in the kitchen
THE RULE	What to do	e.g. - rinse and stack plates after use
THE REWARD	What the person gets for following the rule	e.g. - extra TV/Gaming time
THE CONSEQUENCES	What happens if the person does not follow the rule	e.g. - have to do the washing up

FAMILY RULES CONTRACT

For.....at.....

THE PROBLEM	What not to do?
THE RULE	What to do instead?
THE REWARD	What I will get by following the rule?
THE CONSEQUENCES	What happens if I don't follow the rule?

CONTRACT	
Who was present when the rule was set up?	1. 2. 3. 4.
What date was the rule agreed?	
When will it be reviewed (looked at again)	