

The following is the beginning of a 12 part series on learning survival skills for how to get along in your family. We know that all families have their good times and their bad times. We will look at what it takes to make good times happen.

Part 1 - Parents Are in Charge

Families come in all shapes and sizes. They ultimately are two or more people together over time related by blood or contract. Families are there to meet each family member's need to be an individual and to belong. Being parents in a family is one of the toughest jobs you will ever do. Children do not come with directions. For most it is a hit or miss situation. Unfortunately there are more misses than hits if you listen to the news or read the papers. Healthy families is what we all strive for fortunately it is within our reach.

There are three patterns that appear over and over again in healthy families:

Adults are in charge: At least one adult is willing to provide leadership. They set expectations, enforce them, and notice and nurture other family members.

Room to be close and apart: Each family member can be close to and separate from each other. No one is held too close, or left too much on her own.

Expect to change: Healthy families expect that they will go through changes as their needs change. They are flexible.

Parenting is a commitment raise a child. You commit to help your child develop a positive sense of him/herself, and develop the ability to make and keep friends.

There are two main jobs a parent must do: be a leader, be a model.

BE LEADER

1. Make rules
2. Stick together
3. Stay in charge.

BE A MODEL

1. Plan time with your children
2. Listen to your children
3. Encourage your children
4. Talk with your children

Parents in healthy families are leaders.

To be successful in life, children need to learn to feel good about themselves and to get along with other people. Parents need to teach and guide their children by being leaders. One of the ways that parents act as leaders is to make rules for the family.

MAKE RULES

Healthy families have rules that are made, and enforced by the parents.

All families have their own ways of doing things, or "rules", that define how they work together as a family. These informal rules explain how people talk to each other, how they get along, and who does what in a family. The rules are often passed on from one generation to another.

Sometimes family members say these rules to each other, sometimes they don't. Research on family life shows that in healthy families the parents think about the rules for the family, make rules and enforce them. This may sound obvious. Some families don't think about rules, and some families allow others to make rules for them. This can happen when parents feel unsure or want to avoid conflict.

Single parents need to have the support of another adult they trust to help them think about, and talk over, rules for their children. Parents in stepfamilies will need to talk over rules as a family, and choose rules that make sense for all the people in the family.

Rules hold the family together.

Rules help people to expect so they can count on each other. Rules point the direction for the family by putting the values of the family into action. When parents clearly say what they want and expect in the family by making specific rules, a child knows what is expected of him. From this a child learns cooperation and feels more in control.

FAMILIES WITH TOO FEW RULES:

- *Children have little respect for their parents.
- *Children think they can always get their own way
- *There is very little cooperation.
- *Nobody is sure of anything. You never know what will happen next.
- *Family members don't count on one another.
- *Family members are expected to know what to do without being told and often feel guilty when they don't.
- *The family spends very little.. time together
- *Older children often try to make rules.

FAMILIES WITH TOO MANY RULES:

- *The atmosphere is rigid without room for spontaneity.
- *Rules are often followed because of fear rather than a feeling they will make the family life better.
- *The consequences for breaking rules are harsh and often include physical discipline.
- *Most of the parents' time with their is spent enforcing rules.
- *Parents and children don't talk and listen to each other very much.
- *One parent makes most of the rules and enforces them and often feels lonely and misunderstood.
- *Children don't feel very important
- *There is little room for self-expression

Make rules for what you want, not what you don't want.

Rules are clear ways to tell your children what you want or value. When they are stated in positive words they point your child in the direction of an objective. Rules framed in a negative way - saying what you don't want - don't give direction or purpose. Good rules help you and your child reach your objective. They are maps to help you get the results you want.

HOW TO MAKE SPECIFIC RULES:

1. Know what you want done or to happen (a result you want, an objective).
“Be home by midnight.”
“Put your toys in the box”
2. Know what you are doing now.
3. Decide on a rule that states specifically what you want for the future.
4. Make rules with results you can see or measure.
“I want your clothes put in the closet.”
“I want to see your homework and sign off on it each day by dinner time”
5. State the rule in a sentence.
6. Anticipate areas where child will need a rule and make it.
7. Get your children’s thoughts on rules that affect them, especially as they get older.
Then, you make the final decision.
“You want to drive the car to a dance and we’re worried about your showing off or getting in an accident. Tell us why you think you are ready for it.”
8. Only make rules you are prepared to enforce.
9. Consider your own comfort, as well as your child’s needs in deciding on rules.
“You would like to stay up until 10:00 pm, but your mother and I need some time to ourselves. Bedtime is 9:00 pm.”
10. Expect resistance.
11. Feel free to change any rule you made which no longer gets the result you want.

TRAPS WHEN MAKING RULES

Make rules for what you don’t want.

“Don’t leave your toys around. Don’t be late”

Make rules about attitudes.

“Don’t be so bossy.”

Present the rule with a long explanation.

“When I was your age I had a lot more responsibilities than you have and if I complained. My father...”

Be vague or incomplete.

“I want you to be good.”

“Make sure you study hard.”

Think that if your children loved you they would know what you want without you setting a rule.

Make or changing rules hastily.

Think children should enjoy following rules.

STICK TOGETHER

In healthy families, parents stick together.

Once you have made rules, it is important for parents to stick together to enforce them. Parents, even divorced parents, need to stay on the same team and work together to keep healthy leadership in the family.

Make rules you all believe in.

Sticking together requires that you work out your differences well enough that you can agree on common plans to present to your children. Having two or more bosses who are giving children different rules is confusing and leads to taking sides.

Negotiate your differences.

Negotiating isn't easy. Parents have to be willing and able to talk directly with each other about what each of them wants and how they feel. You will need to be prepared to compromise (you don't have to like each other to negotiate).

Be clear who is responsible to parent each child, and who isn't.

Most two-parent households have an overall agreement that they share responsibility for parenting their children. Sometimes other people help with caring for the children. These people might be older children, divorced co-parents, stepparents, grandparents, unrelated adults living in the home, neighbors, or child care people who are assigned some parental authority. No matter who is in the family, it is important to have clear understandings about the scope of responsibility of each adult. Who is on duty in the evenings, or the weekends? Whose idea prevails when there is a difference of opinion? Children deserve to know who their bosses are.

WHO'S ON DUTY?

List all of those who participate in childcare in your home.

WHEN

WHO'S IN CHARGE

morning

night

weekend days

weekend nights

get to school

get from school

afterschool time

discipline

Healthy families stick together to decide and enforce family rules. Sometimes, however, parents don't have time to talk over and decide on rules. A decision needs to be made at the moment on something the parents haven't talked over. This frequently is the case in families where one parent is away a lot, or lives in a separate home. If this happens in your family, we encourage you to back each other up with the children and then talk over your differences together later.

Single parents, get an adult whom you trust to talk with about your decisions.

Parenting is too hard to do alone. All parents, especially single parents, must give themselves time apart from their children to think out and get ideas and support from a co-parent, a good friend, or a family member.

TIPS FOR STICKING TOGETHER

Expect each parent to work as a teammate in making rules (even ex-partners).

Make rules which you both believe in and make sense to you.

Meet at least once a week for 15 minutes to go over any needs you have for making or enforcing rules.

Negotiate rules together before bringing them up with the children.

Support your joint decisions and back up the parent who is handling enforcement of a rule.

If one of you is too strict and the other too relaxed about rules, agree to each become more like the other.

TRAPS WHEN STICKING TOGETHER

Assume your partner will automatically agree with rules you establish.

Avoid discussions because you're afraid of arguments.

Side with the children and leave it to them to change your partner's mind.

Leave yourself out of the disciplining.

Feeling required to make quick decisions.

STAY IN CHARGE

Parents in healthy families stay in charge.

Once you have made the rules and stick together, the next step is to stay in charge. Parents need to give a clear and consistent message that **they** have overall responsibility to decide how things will be done in the family so the children will thrive. You can be a leader without being bossy. Healthy rules allow children to know what is expected of them. Enforcing the rules teaches children that there are consequences for their actions. A lot of parents grew up with physical discipline and are used to doing the same with their children. There are some dangers in using this type of consequence because, instead of teaching, it uses force or hurt and can lead to abuse by parents. We have included some alternatives to physical discipline.

Staying in charge takes repetition.

With a younger child, taking action is more effective than using words, for example: if a young child is running towards the street you will need to run after him, stop him and remove him to safety; or if a child is throwing a tantrum, you will physically pick her up and remove her from the grocery store or restaurant. As a child gets older, using your words to stay in charge will be more effective.

STEPS TO STAYING IN CHARGE

Explain what you want. Tell your child exactly what actions you want.

Show your child ways to do what is wanted.

Use few words.

Check for understanding.

Example: "Tom, I want you to carry your lunch to the car every school morning. Put it in your backpack right after breakfast and put it by the front door.

Give support.

Hands off:

The job of giving discipline has two parts. One part is keeping hands off or stepping back from the situation. The other part is hands on or stepping closer to the situation. When you say what you expect to your children you are hands on,. To stay in charge, use more of the hands off approach.

Ignore grumbling and arguments.

Give time for them to act.

Example: The best first step to handle resistance is to ignore it. Expect it, and give it the very least attention you can. Hands off!
As Tom says “Why do I have to take a lunch? I hate those jelly sandwiches.” You say nothing, not in words or gestures. You look away, walk away, distract yourself. Don’t encourage this behavior by giving your attention to it.

It is good practice to say what you want, and then get away from your child for at least five minutes. Looking at them just after directing them encourages them to debate, complain, negotiate, rather than getting on with the task. You may say ‘but if I don’t stick around, he’ll never do what I say.’ Maybe not, but sticking around just feeds the flames of rebellion. Get away, plan, and choose what you’ll do next.

Hands on:

Praise steps forward.

Many parents are “too nice” while staying in charge. They give too much hands on attention before the child puts any or much effort into the task. It is best to be hands on after your child has made the effort.

Example: “You remembered to put your lunch in your backpack, and you did it even before you ate your cereal! (You chose to focus on what your child did do, even if he forgot to put it into the car.)

If they put no effort out, then you step in to apply the consequence.

Help as needed.

Problems appear when a parent expects too much of the child or thinks too much parent backup is necessary. The way to help a child develop responsibility is to give it to them a little bit at a time. You can expect resistance. Stand back from it. Watch for your child’s effort and decide from there what additional hands on help may be necessary.

Example: “Let’s think out together what you can do tomorrow morning to be sure that backpack gets into the car. Tell me one of your ideas.”

Act on consequences.

Remind once of the rewards and/or consequences.

Example: “When you put your lunch in your pack and take it to the car and on to school, then you will have it to eat when you are hungry.”

Be businesslike as you give consequences.

Example: As you arrive in the car at school and Tom does not have his lunch, say nothing. If Tom announces “I forgot my lunch,” say nothing more than “Hmmm.” If he proceeds to ask you to go home to get it for him, say “It is up to you to bring your lunch. Looks like no lunch for you today.”

No humiliation or hitting.

Get outside help if what you do isn't producing cooperation.

Example: “Tom seems unable to remember his lunch, even with reminders, I'm not sure what to make of it. Let's talk to my sister. She's an elementary school teacher, and maybe she can help us to sort this out.”

ALTERNATIVES TO PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Discipline means getting a particular task done and providing a “teaching” experience that will guide a child. It is most effective and lasting when you point your child in the direction you want, instead of towards what will happen if he doesn't complete it.

When you point your child in the right direction you're laying the groundwork for later on. You're building a bridge together. The most common forms of discipline are:

1. SET LIMITS

Set specific times and places for tasks or homework.

Limit interruptions from TV, phones, and friends during these times.

Limit the choices available for toys.

2. PAY ATTENTION

Pay attention when children do what you want by noticing and paying specific compliments like, “I like the way you put your toys away in the box on the shelf. You're really neat.”

Reward children with notes, talks, and even treats.

3. IGNORE

Avoid paying time and attention to bad behavior.

Walk away from arguments, obnoxious language and whining.

4. USE TIME OUTS

Use time outs to give children time to get back in control and figure out what they are to do and how they should behave.

Make the time outs between five minutes to one hour depending on the level of upset and need to calm down (for the parent, too.)

5. HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Connect consequences to the task or job to be done or the desired behavior.

If a car is misused, limit use of the car.

If the phone is misused, limit its use.

If a chore is left for you to do, assign other chores that will help make up the time you spent. Cleaning up someone else's mess could mean that person cleans several rooms or several times.

6. PLAN REWARDS

Rewards are a consequence.

Your time and attention are the best rewards.

7. LIMIT CHOICES

Offer children a choice among a limited number of options.

“You can go out either Friday night or Saturday night.”

“You can either read or play quietly in your room.”

For more information on Survival Skills for Families, contact your brigade Family Advocacy Coordinator or call 1-800-223-3735 ex. 6-2390.