



It's All in the Family: Establishing Household Rules

In the “typical” family, household rules and expectations evolve organically over time and will change with the natural ebb and flow of the family. A child who was raised in your home from infancy knows how “things go” because he or she is a part of your family’s shared experiences, habits, routines, and culture.

While it may be the expectation that the child entering into your care will “catch on” to the household rules, it isn’t always that simple. Remember, that child is coming to you with his or her own family’s culture, rules, and routines. And those rules may be dramatically different than your own. Even if the child came from an environment where there were few rules if any, this is his or her “normal.” Letting a child know as early as possible how things work in your home can help him or her better navigate a possibly frightening transition.

Initial Meeting

Ask any child who has been through the “initial meeting” process with a potential caregiver and they will tell you their greatest fear is in all the unknowns. This initial meeting with the child, the case manager, and the child’s parent(s) or previous caregiver is an opportunity to learn about one another, share vital information, and hopefully discover common and familiar rules that can provide much needed consistency and comfort. Although we don’t

traditionally think of “setting down rules” as a warm and fuzzy way to introduce a child to your home, discussing household rules and expectations can actually help give predictability to a chaotic and uncertain time. It also may offer some reassurance that he or she will be safe in your home. For example, if a child came from a home where there was a lot of fighting and domestic violence, he or she may feel reassured that yelling and hitting are not allowed in your home.



Basic Rule Setting

Rules are going to differ for each family, but there are some basics that serve as great guidelines.

- Keep rules simple and few, especially in the beginning.
- Stick to the basics, without getting specific and detailed.
- Use positive language where possible (do vs. don’t).
- If needed, post a *short* written list.
- Be clear about the “why” behind the rule.

When household rules are “big” enough to cover basic codes of conduct within the family, children with particular issues or behaviors are not singled out or shamed. For example, a child who has suffered sexual abuse may have specific safety rules. It may, however, be good practice that the entire

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family have rules about keeping bedroom doors open unless changing, only one person in the bathroom at a time, or being clothed when exiting the bedroom or bathroom. And while some of these rules may be a given in your family, you can't assume they are for the child.

Some families have opted to limit family rules to a few general categories:

- Be Safe
- Be Respectful
- Be Responsible

The family then defines what being safe, respectful, or responsible looks like for their family. For example, "Be Safe" may include no hitting, no running in the house, no bringing strangers into the house, and supervised internet use. "Be Respectful" may include no profanity, no name calling, no taking things that don't belong to you, no damaging property, no phone calls after 10pm, and respecting others' privacy. "Be Responsible" may include cleaning up after yourself, taking care of assigned chores, being home by curfew, keeping music at a reasonable volume.

Involving the Child and Family Members

Children, especially teens, can learn from talking with you about the house rules and what and why you expect certain behavior from them. Family meetings where family members can discuss their needs, wants, and problems with certain rules can be particularly helpful. Be open to modifying rules where appropriate. Buy-in and accountability are easier when everyone is in agreement on the rules. Since behavior equals communication, remember to discuss one-on-one with children any areas where they are struggling. Don't forget to also talk about what's working well, too!

One foster dad shared that, although there

are some household rules that are non-negotiable, he has found it effective to hold family meetings and collectively determine the rules. This is done each time a new person becomes a part of the family, and continues on an ongoing basis. "When the whole family has input and an opportunity to discuss and agree to the rules, we're much better at holding one another responsible. It's also a chance to explain that the rules aren't meant to be restrictive or punishing, they're meant to keep everyone safe and happy. If everyone has input, no one can say 'I didn't know' or 'It's unfair!'"

Rules vs. Routines

It may be helpful to make the distinction between "rules" and "routines." One way to think about it is that household rules should apply to pretty much everyone in the household. On the other hand, "routines" may differ from family member to family member and may be dependent on age, developmental stage, or other special circumstances. These may include things such as curfew, bedtime, bathing schedules, snack times, or assigned chores.

Again, with *any* rules in your home, remember that there will be a transition period. While your rules may represent a baseline for behavior expectations, remember that trauma and history play into the lives of every child. If a particular rule or expectation seems to be a trigger for a child, try not to assume defiance on the part of the child. He or she is communicating with you through their behaviors. Ask yourself (and the child) what happened that makes this particular rule a struggle for them. (For example, they may not feel safe if they can't snack whenever they want.)

By creating reasonable household rules and expectations that the children in your care can achieve, you will be promoting stability, consistency, safety, self-esteem, and overall well-being.



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