

Raising Kids Who Care

Session 2: Rules, Rules, Rules

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God,
Be with us as we teach our children
to care for those around them.

Help us to see
where we may have overlooked
or missed the pain of another.

Give us compassion for ourselves
and all parents on this journey
as we guide our children to live your commands
and help to build your Kingdom.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.

How Do We Talk about Rules?

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

● In *The Joy of Love*, Pope Francis talks about the importance of parents “fostering good habits” in their children. He and many experts agree that “active methods” and dialogue are the best ways to help children learn the importance of values. The question is, *what does that look like?*

● It can be hard to set rules and boundaries that seem fair and reasonable for kids. Sometimes we enforce rules in a way that might be effective in the short term but doesn't lead our children to care for others around them.



- Sociologists recognize three basic patterns of how rules are enforced in families: power assertion, love withdrawal, and inductive rule enforcement. Our faith tradition and experts in early childhood development would encourage an “inductive” process, which we’ll learn more about in the next section. First, let’s explore why the other approaches can be less helpful.
- Power assertion as a way of enforcing rules uses superior physical strength or authority of the parent to make a child obey. There are certain times when power assertion is necessary—for example, to grab the hand of a toddler who reaches for a hot pan or to physically remove a kid behaving roughly on the playground. But this way of enforcing rules through power only addresses the immediate problem and doesn’t affect the child’s deeper understanding of the rule or motivate the child to act differently.
- Enforcing rules through power can also have negative side-effects, like teaching kids that physical force is a good way to get someone smaller or younger than you to do what you want. For many kids, this way of enforcing rules can look or feel like bullying.
- Another common pattern that experts see in families is rules enforced through “love withdrawal.” It can be easy as a parent to feel hurt or sad when our kids misbehave, and we might interpret that action as the child’s lack of love.
- But when children are taught to act a certain way to earn love from their parents, actions can become connected to approval rather than a child’s own sense of right and wrong.
- This can also create fear in children that they will lose their parent’s approval, and this way of enforcing rules can even cause children to lie or cheat as a way to maintain approval from parents, teachers, or other authority figures.
- I’m sure many of us have had a personal experience of rules being enforced in an unhelpful or even damaging way. We may have come across a rule that did not make sense to us or the painful process of feeling like we were constantly trying to gain someone’s approval.
- Being a parent and exercising unconditional love and patience can be challenging. The invitation that Pope Francis gives us in *The Joy of Love* is to not be intimidated or fearful of raising our kids or making mistakes, but to enter into a journey of growth with our kids where “children can truly learn for themselves the importance of certain values” and where we can “lovingly...help them grow in freedom” into caring individuals.

Reflection Questions

- ① What experiences have you had in your own childhood or as a parent that serve as examples of unhelpful rule enforcement through power assertion or love withdrawal?
- ② When have you felt that you used parental authority in a way that didn’t feel right? What might you do differently if you were faced with that situation again?

Inductive Process

- As we learned in the last section and perhaps our own childhood experience, withdrawing love from our children in times when they have disappointed us and enforcing rules through power often have negative effects.
- Of course, most of us would feel that we love our children without any strings attached—just as God loves us—but we know that in the day-to-day this ideal can be messy. What counts is the perspective of our children. Do they feel just as loved when they mess up or fall short as they do when we are particularly proud of them?
- This unconditional acceptance and love do not mean that children can do whatever they want. Rules, boundaries, and structure are so important in the life of a child, but these rules should help our kids become more and more independent.
- Our households and families should have well-enforced rules. Certain actions or kinds of behavior should certainly be prohibited, but children also need to know *why* these actions are disruptive and how they hurt others. We should spend time talking with our children about the reasons behind the rules and the consequences of unacceptable behavior.
- A child's own empathy can play an important role here as we talk with our kids about the possible consequences of certain kinds of behavior, at school or at home. Do you ever ask your child to put her or himself in the shoes of a classmate or a sibling to imagine how a situation might have felt for others involved?
- This inductive or active form of rule making and enforcement often involves asking our children more questions. This allows space for kids to think about a situation and why a certain rule might exist. For example, asking a kid who has left his shoes in the middle of the floor, "Is that where your shoes belong?" followed by the comment, "Someone might trip if you leave them there" is an example of inductive rule making.
- Another important step in this process is to imagine how things look or feel from your child's point of view. Are there ways that our children could participate more in decision making in the house and family? Do they feel manipulated to act a certain way?
- As much as I might want to say to my children that they have to do something "Because I said so," I know that is more the frustration or exhaustion talking. As Jennifer Poindexter outlines in the Positive Parenting FAQ (AFineParent.com), some good, inductive alternatives include:
 - "My answer is 'No.' Here's why...";
 - "Nothing has changed in the last 5 minutes. My answer is still 'No.' The reason is still..."
 - "I've already answered that question. Do I seem like the kind of parent that would change my mind that quickly?"
 - "I said 'No.' Can you tell me why?"
- Pope Francis encourages us to think about where our kids are spiritually and developmentally, asking, "Do we seek to understand 'where' are children really are in their journey?" (*JL*, 261) Our job is to walk with our kids, showing them that they are unconditionally loved by God and us, and that they have the responsibility and the joy of giving that love to other people.
- Positive behaviors and patterns should be encouraged in positive ways. A system of family rules—about bedtime, household responsibilities, screen time, activities, etc—simplify family life and offer children a sense of security and belonging. These rules can become a source of identity, informing how children understand themselves and their role in the family. When a particular rule becomes "what we always do in our family," it becomes as much of a ritual as specific holiday celebrations.
- We'll talk more about forming these rules and household rituals in the next session.

Reflection Questions

① Share a recent example of when you have used a more “inductive” form of rule enforcement or when you and a child had a good conversation about breaking or upholding a rule.

② Take a moment to imagine, from the perspective of your child, what it feels like when you enforce the rules. From this perspective, in what ways do you feel like you enforce rules well? In what ways do you feel like you could do better?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Jesus, you invited all to come and follow you.

You showed them that you are the way,
the truth, and the life.

You taught your disciples how to think and act
and reminded them of God’s love
every step of the way.

Grant that we may make disciples
of our own children,
teaching them your way, your truth,
and your life.

We pray this in your name.

Amen.

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