

Raising Kids Who Care

Session 3: Habits of the Heart

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Dear God,
we thank you for the gift of our children,
with all of their joy and complexities.

Send your Holy Spirit to be with us today
to give us insight about how they
—and we—
spend our time and energy.

Let our minds and hearts be open
to how you invite us to grow
in our role as parents.

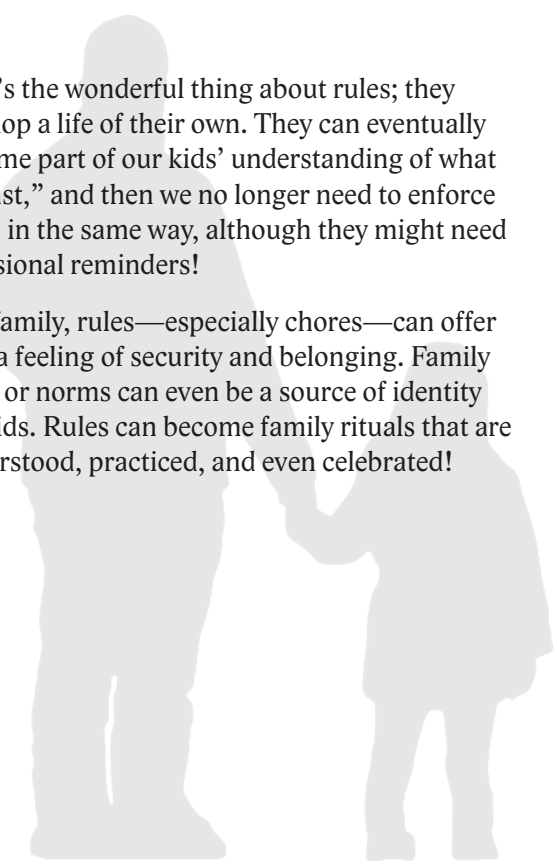
We ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Household Rituals

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.

- There is a long-standing rule in our home that whoever prepares the meal does not have to do the cleanup. As the kids grew up and eventually left for college, the rule became less necessary because meal prep became simpler and clean-up faster. When the kids return for a holiday or semester break and everyone's favorite dish finds its way to the table, each cook is always grateful for the rule.

- That's the wonderful thing about rules; they develop a life of their own. They can eventually become part of our kids' understanding of what is "just," and then we no longer need to enforce them in the same way, although they might need occasional reminders!
- In a family, rules—especially chores—can offer kids a feeling of security and belonging. Family rules or norms can even be a source of identity for kids. Rules can become family rituals that are understood, practiced, and even celebrated!



- My daughter once had a friend over, and the friend arrived before my daughter was finished with her chores. I said to the girls, “Before you go and play, you just have to finish hanging the rest of the laundry on the line.” My daughter’s friend was quite cheerful and engaged as she helped my daughter. Later, I said to her, “Emily, thank you. You are always so helpful when you’re here.” She responded, “I think it’s because my Mom never lets me help at home and I don’t have chores.” I was so struck by her response. She really wanted to be involved and feel the sense of satisfaction of helping with household responsibilities.
- In earlier generations, children were given more meaningful opportunities to contribute to the household responsibilities such as planning and preparing meals, cleaning the house, taking care of sick family members, and more.
- Today many parents are much more hesitant to ask their children to do household tasks or they only assign smaller responsibilities, such as clearing the table or cleaning up after themselves. However, many studies show that being more involved in household chores helps children develop a more caring attitude, makes kids more responsible and independent, and makes them feel like a more active part of family life.
- So “rules” do not always have to be about what *not* to do. Part of the active process of parenting can be developing household rules and routines that bring the family closer together and allow the work of a household to be more evenly distributed.
- Consider the difference between the following two families. In the first, after the family eats dinner together, Dad does the dishes while the children clear the table, vacuum underneath it, and then feed the cat, while Mom puts away the left-overs and cleans the counters. There may be some grumbling at times, and playing with the cat slows the speed of the children’s work, but the family is all engaged together.
- In another family, Mom does the dishes and all the clean-up while Dad goes back to his home office to work more while the kids scatter to their rooms and get lost in their electronic devices until bedtime.
- The first family may never claim they are enjoying great family time, but they certainly are living out values of cooperation, personal responsibility and informal connection during which stories can be told and experiences shared.
- A child psychologist once told me that it is more work for parents to have one child who is not expected to take on household responsibilities than it is to have two children who are active participants in the care of the family and home.
- Household rules and rituals can help children understand themselves and their role in the family. It is important to decide upon clear rules and practices and enforce them consistently. It is empowering for our children if we trust them with real tasks, and ultimately it helps us and them—though they *will* complain sometimes! These rules can become habits, and as our faith teaches us, good habits become virtues.

Reflection Questions

- ① What are some of the rules and expectations in your household? What are some of your household rituals?
- ② If you asked your children what the household rules were, what would they say?
- ③ How have rules, rituals, or household chores shaped how you relate to your children or how they relate to you?

The Importance of Forgiveness

- As we know, even with consistently enforced household or school rules, our kids will sometimes break them. It's important to think intentionally about how we might respond when this happens.
- I once worked very closely with a woman I respected deeply. She was a mother of four daughters, and while she was a very good mother, she was also in touch with the fact that we are all human and flawed. She knew that, as a mother, she was not always perfect, sometimes far from it. But what impressed me most about her as I witnessed her interact with her kids was her willingness to apologize.
- If she had said something to one of her daughters that she later realized was not the best way to handle the situation, she would go into her daughter's room before bedtime, sit on her bed, and apologize, explaining why she had said what she said and why she felt like she needed to apologize.
- I also saw her practice this with our work staff. I learned from her the importance of humility and the importance of forgiveness.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation can also be important in helping children distinguish the difference between doing something bad or wrong, and *being* bad. The question is, how do we help kids accept responsibility for unacceptable behavior while not reinforcing unhelpful feelings of shame?
- Children can be taught at an early age to recognize that particular *actions* are shameful because these actions are below what is expected of them, without seeing *themselves* as shameful people. Trust is often first understood when children realize that the adults around them—parents, teachers, etc.—expect certain behaviors of them that they are very capable of fulfilling.
- When a child fails to live up to that trust, it hurts that relationship. It is good if children feel discomfort over the distress of another person, and it is very important that they feel discomfort if they have caused this distress. In these instances, it is important to focus on how the behavior makes the child feel and on how it affects others in the group, not on how it makes us—the caregiver—feel.
- We want children to do something because it is the right thing to do, it makes them feel good about themselves, and can make their peers feel good about them, too.
- When a child has made a serious mistake, it's important to talk about the consequences and help the child think through some solutions. The goal is to build independence in the child by offering ways to correct the wrong and at the same time reinforce the sense of responsibility for having caused the problem.
- If a child is to develop a healthy sense of trust and a healthy sense of guilt for legitimate wrongdoing, she needs to be free to make mistakes and try again. The same is true for us as parents. Hopefully, we can feel the humility and mercy to make mistakes and seek forgiveness from our children when we feel we have not lived up to the best version of ourselves.
- Forgiveness teaches us that we are trustworthy people, capable of taking responsibility for our mistakes, even when assuming that responsibility is painful. If we want to protect our children (or ourselves) from ever feeling bad about anything, we may deprive them of emotional skills that they need to grow into moral people.

Reflection Questions

- ① Share an example of a recent moment when your child disappointed you or betrayed your trust. How did you respond to this situation?
- ② When have you felt like you did not live up to being the kind of parent you wanted to be? Did you seek forgiveness from your children? Why or why not? Please share.
- ③ Share about a time recently when you felt you handled a moment of discipline in a way that was loving and effective.
- ④ What are some things that worry you in reprimanding or disciplining your kids?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God,
guide us as we teach our children
right from wrong
and good from harm.

Help us to help them
to realize when they have done wrong
and take responsibility for their actions.

May they always remember
that we love them regardless of their actions.

Grant that we might find joy in each other daily.

In Jesus' name, we pray.

Amen.

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