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Encouraging Your Child with Learning Disabilities to Follow the Rules

SchwabLearning.org Asks:

Parents frequently complain their child with learning disabilities (LD) "doesn't listen" to them or adhere to family rules. They claim they have tried a variety of disciplinary measures but "nothing seems to work." If this is true, what can parents expect of their children with learning disabilities, and how can they enforce expected standards of behavior?

Betty Osman, Ph.D., Answers:

Rule-governed behavior is a necessary part of family life and all children/adolescents, with or without LD, need standards and expectations. Parents do children no favor when they "feel sorry" for them because of their LD and make no demands. When expectations are realistic and standards maintained, children feel more competent and confident of success.

Most parents learn through experience how to manage their children with LD and, conversely, what does not work. Telling an adolescent to be home at six o'clock for dinner, for example, may not ensure that she'll be there, particularly if she has problems with time and organization. A watch with an alarm or a phone call as a reminder will be more effective than a rebuke and a negative consequence when she is "late again." In other words, **anticipation and advance preparation may be the key in many situations, in addition, of course, to parent-child communication.**

Three Levels of Rules

Although families differ along the strictness-permissiveness continuum and have different standards for compliance, it might help to conceptualize three levels of family rules. The **first is the "have-to's" in the family, i.e., the short list of rules that are not negotiable and must be followed** without debate or argument. These might include getting to school on time, using appropriate language in speaking to parents, and attending religious services, if that is a family value.

In the second level or category, a much longer list, are the **"should-but-don't-have-to's."** A child should wear a coat if it is cold or pouring rain, for example, but it is not a "must" because you don't get sick that way. Combing one's hair and daily showers are appropriate, but they may be discussed and even negotiated.

The third category includes **children's free choices** — clothing worn to school (within the school's dress code, of course), with whom they spend leisure time, and the extracurricular activities they select. I have found when families write their lists cooperatively, children usually recognize they have more autonomy and decision-making than they previously thought. Children may think they want unlimited power, but it frightens them if they become omnipotent in the family. They feel more secure knowing their parents are authority figures whose job it is to protect them and keep them safe.

Elements of Discipline

Although anticipation and prevention generally are more effective than criticism or punishment after the fact, parents can't always prevent an infraction or a child's disregard of an established rule. What then can parents do when disciplinary measures are called for and no consequence they impose

seems to make an impression on the child or adolescent with LD?

First, it is important to remember that “discipline” literally means “teach” not “punish.”

Furthermore, as Rick Lavoie, a recognized authority on LD, negative consequences never change behavior, they only stop them in that particular time and setting. Positive consequences, on the other hand, have been shown to be far more effective in changing inappropriate behavior patterns. Children respond well to praise, encouragement, and positive reinforcement. Complimenting a child for a responsible, cooperative, or compassionate act will tend to promote that behavior.

There are occasions, however, when negative consequences become necessary. Insofar as possible, they should always be immediate, definite, and most of all, relevant. Young people with LD tend not to perceive cause and effect and are likely to have short memories, so prolonged punishments not only lose their impact, but also their effectiveness.

Taking away a child's favorite toy or the privilege of going to a movie for being rude to parents, for example, is not relevant to the infraction. The focus for the young person, then, becomes the lost toy or movie and his anger at his parents, rather than what he did to incur the punishment in the first place. A more appropriate consequence might be for the parent to respond, “I won't listen to that kind of talk,” and walk away.

If a child leaves his bicycle outside overnight despite warnings to put it away, the child might not have the privilege of riding for one day, meeting the criteria of immediate, definite, and relevant.

And if the TV isn't turned off in timely fashion, taking away TV for that evening might serve well. (A caveat, though: parents cannot expect a child with LD to turn off television on command in the middle of a program. It is physically and psychologically impossible for him to make that transition. Rather it would be wise to ask him to turn off the set “after this show” or on the half-hour before dinner will be ready.)

Effective and Ineffective Disciplining Techniques

A word about the use of “time-outs,” which were never intended to be used as punishment. Rather, the purpose was to remove a child from the offending stimulus. In this vein, a frustrated parent saying to a child, “I need a time-out because I'm feeling angry” or “We both need a time-out” conveys the message to the child that separation is in order to prevent an unpleasant confrontation, and both parties share the responsibility.

Teasing and threatening a child are not just ineffectual disciplinary measures, they are also highly destructive, particularly for children who are sensitive to criticism. Teasing, after all, can be an expression of hostility said with a smile, and most children quickly become aware of the underlying feelings. And clearly physical punishment does not work, except to exacerbate the child's anger and teach him violent retaliation is acceptable.

In addition to advance preparation and mutual time-outs, two other techniques may be effective. The first is to ignore the undesirable behavior, withdrawing attention from the child. Children with LD crave attention, almost at any price, and negative attention certainly is more desirable than no attention. A second strategy is to model appropriate behavior, based on the principle that imitation is a basic form of learning, beginning in early childhood.

To sum up, disciplining a child or adolescent with LD is not an easy task, particularly in light of some of these characteristics commonly associated with learning disabilities:

- the inability to perceive cause and effect and to generalize from one situation to another

- a short memory for misdeeds but not for the consequences
- the tendency to blame others rather than assume responsibility for his behavior.

With patience, humor, and a sense of perspective, parents can become their child's ally, even in their role of authority.

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About the Contributors

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Other Resources

Books

1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0963386190/schwabfoundation/

By Thomas Phelan, Ph.D.

SOS! Help for Parents: A Practical Guide for Handling Common Everyday Behavior Problems

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935111204/qid=1028073648/schwabfoundation/>

By Lynn Clark, Ph.D., John Robb (Illustrator)

When Anger Hurts Your Kids: A Parent's Guide

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1572240458/schwabfoundation/>

By Matthew McKay (Editor)