

Great Article from Alyson Schafer's Parenting Newsletter

Let's talk about limits and boundaries! I have had to review this concept with many of my family counselling clients so I thought I should write about it here for you all to benefit from too.

Usually the topic comes up when a parent describes a recent situation when their child had a blow up or freak out that seemed unreasonable to the parent. A classic example is how angry and explosive a child is when they are told to get off the iPad. Or maybe it's when they are told they can't have a snack before supper, or that they have to do their chores before you drive them to a friend's house.

The parents' issue is their child's emotional reactivity to the situation. Those kids are really protesting large and loud!

When I review the situation, and ask for clarity on the rules, limits, boundaries around the issue, I quickly learn that they are ambiguous to the child. Sure, the parents understand their own logic for asking their kids to get off tech, or not to eat a snack, or get their chores done first, but the child isn't clear. In fact, their emotionality tells me they perceive this request is not reasonable and unfair. Why is that?

Well, let me compare this to playing a game of soccer. When you teach kids the rules, they come to understand where out of bounds is. The line is well chalked. If the ball crosses the line, the referee blows the whistle. Now if the ref makes a fair call, the play resumes and no one gets fused. Sure, they might be disappointed – but a fair call is a fair call. Players only get upset and rage when they think it's an unfair call.

In parenting, it's a parent's job to set the limits and boundaries with young kids. With older children you collaborate to make family rules you can all live with together. Once those are established, it's a parent's job to ensure they are enforced consistently. Since children are experiential learners they will test the boundaries to ensure they are in place. That doesn't mean they are mean or nasty – they are just learning in the only way they know how. Your part in their education is to keep that line clearly chalked and be kind and consistent with refereeing the play.

A good example of how this ends conflict is seat belts. Most parents will agree they have never driven the car unless their kids are buckled up. This is a rule most parents are 100 percent consistent with and after initial struggles, kids settle into the routine of knowing they need to be buckled in the car and the fighting ceases. They know you won't budge on a safety rule. They stop testing the rule.

If you can apply the same kind consistency with other rules, you will have less explosive break downs. If iPad is only for the weekends, they will stop whining for it on Monday's. If it is always the rule that chores happen before visiting friends, they will stop feeling you unfairly exercised your parenting power to ruin their day.

Believe it or not – children who have a more explosive temperament actually respond to firm rules better. Research into sleep training methods show that they respond better to cold turkey approaches than to Ferberizing in stages because that is more ambiguous. I think that applies to other situations too.

So for March – why not pick just one rule that you tend to waiver on or negotiate over and just chalk that line firmer and be consistent until the reactivity of your child reduces and ends. Once you have that one "hot spot" resolved – pick another. Tackle it one at a time and see it through till you have harmony.

Happy Parenting,
Alyson Schafer