

If you don't have rules, you have chaos

Over the years, as I've worked with parents, I've come to appreciate the value of simplicity. The older I get, the more I want things to be straightforward. Invariably, when parents have problems with their children - and I include myself in this - I ask one question: Do you have rules? The vast majority have said 'no.'

But here's the thing: rules mean order. And if we don't have order, we have the opposite which is disorder.

Why Rules Matter

When you have rules, everyone knows what's expected, what happens, and in what way. Think about starting a new job. You get clear instructions about your role, someone discusses expectations with you, and you receive mentoring at the start. Later, there are regular check-ins to see how you're doing.

Rules in a family should function the same way-clear, structured, and consistent. They help us reduce disorder and bring more order into our parenting. That's what we're going to cover in this module.

Key Questions We'll Address Today

1. How do we set up rules and boundaries?
2. At what age can we expect a child to be independent?
3. What do we do if our co-parent (or someone else raising our child) isn't on the same page?
4. How do we communicate rules to our kids?
5. How consistent do we need to be?
6. Can we make exceptions?
7. How do we put all this into practice?

A Summary of Techniques/Ideas In Today's Module

1. Identify the biggest problem
2. Pick Your Rules
3. Workout who makes the rules
4. Create Visual Rules
5. Use Empathy
6. Set the Stage
7. Praise the Positive Behaviour
8. Offer 2 Options Within Limits
9. Use Personal Responsibility
10. Get your partner/coparent on board (the smart way)

Before you Begin

Before we set rules, it's essential to ensure you've completed two critical steps. First, in Module 1, you worked on managing your own anger and rage. If you feel like this area still needs work, it's important to revisit it before moving forward. Remaining as calm as possible while allowing space for your emotions is key to successfully implementing rules and boundaries.

The second important step is understanding the why behind your child's behavior. If you don't know the root cause of their actions, setting rules may not be effective. Ask yourself:

1. **Have I worked on my own anger, stress levels, and emotional regulation?**
2. **Am I certain about why my child behaves the way they do?**

If your answer to both is yes, then you are ready to implement the techniques in this module.

Step 1 - Identify the Biggest Problem

Let's start with a simple exercise. Think of the most frustrating behavior your child has right now. What is the one thing that irritates you the most?

Got it?

Now, ask yourself these questions:

1. Am I always consistent about what I expect from my child with regards to this behaviour?
2. Does my child know how to do what I'm asking them to do? A two-year-old can't organize their day, do homework, or get dressed independently. But for a nine- or ten-year-old, those expectations are reasonable.
3. Am I focused on teaching, or am I focused on punishing?

This is the key lesson: rules teach, not punish. Rules aren't about making your child's life miserable. That's how many of us experienced rules growing up. Rules aren't punishment. They create order, not fear.

So, how do you implement rules and boundaries? Follow this 10 step process to find out how!

Step 2 - Pick Your Rules

So you've thought about the situations that drive you mad—those repeated behaviors from your child that cause frustration and lead to power struggles. These are the moments where setting a clear rule can make a big difference. Identify the behaviors that you want to address, such as refusing to wash their hair, resisting homework,



spending too much time on screens, eating too many sweets, or constantly asking for new toys.

For each situation, think about the limit you want to set. If your child refuses to wash their hair, decide on a rule. How often is acceptable? Once a week might be reasonable for younger kids. When is the best time? A weekend bath might be easier when there's more time and less stress.

Another example: your child constantly asks for ice cream whenever you leave the house. What's the limit? Maybe they can have ice cream once a week, on weekends. Or, when on holiday, they can have it daily, but when you're home, it's a weekend-only treat. If you allow chocolate, maybe a small piece after lunch, but only if it's dark chocolate with at least 70% cocoa. Be specific: when they can have it, how much, and who will give it to them.

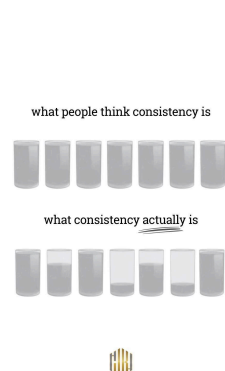
If your child spends too much time on screens, decide on limits. They can use their tablet for one hour a day after homework. They can play three specific games and must ask permission before downloading new ones. If bedtime is a struggle, set a clear expectation. On school nights, bedtime is 9:30 PM, and on weekends, it's 10:30 PM.

Are you unhappy with your child's diet? Make a rule. In your family, healthy meals could be required at least four times a week. To clarify, list what counts as healthy and when exceptions apply. This helps avoid confusion and ensures consistency.

Rules don't have to be rigid. As your child grows, their rules should evolve too. When they're younger, they need firmer boundaries. As they mature, involve them in setting limits. This helps meet their need for autonomy and gives them a sense of control. Some rules should be set by parents, while others can be discussed with your child, depending on their age.

Step 3: Work Out Who Can Make the Rules

When you tell your child, "You have to do this because I say so," it won't work—at least, not for long. Your child needs to understand how rules are set and who has the authority to set them. If rules are broken, who takes responsibility? If there are exceptions, when do they come into play?



So, who sets the rules? In most families, there are multiple adults involved in raising a child—parents, grandparents, teachers, or caregivers. Which of these people do you want to work with to create rules? You might decide to meet on the weekend to set family rules together, showing your child that the adults are aligned and working as a team.

Rules apply to many aspects of family life—screen time, diet, bedtime, pocket money, and more. Discuss these with the other adults in your child's life. What rules do you want? What exceptions are acceptable? What consequences should follow if rules are broken? When children see rules being made and understand when and why exceptions happen, they

are more likely to cooperate.

For example, a friend of mine and her family sit down regularly-often at mealtime-to review their household rules. They discuss which rules to keep, which to modify, and where they can be more flexible. Even though their child is only five, they invite his input on certain rules. The adults then communicate their decisions clearly and consistently, reinforcing the same message.

When adults agree on basic rules, children learn that exceptions are thought out and not random. For example, if the rule is that ice cream is only allowed on Thursdays, but it's an unusually hot Tuesday and your child begs for ice cream, you might call your partner first to discuss it. The key is showing unity, not making spur-of-the-moment decisions that undermine the rules.

If Grandparents or friends, for example, do have different rules, Say: 'Yes, Grandad has his rules. At home, we do it this way.' Children are elastic and can work out quickly that different houses have different rules and boundaries (for more on working with co-parents, see Step 10).

Step 4: Create Visual Rules

This is one of my favorite rule-making techniques because it works brilliantly for parents and kids alike, regardless of age.

You've established the rules and boundaries for your family - congratulations! You've worked with other adults in your child's life, like your partner, parents, or caregivers, and possibly included your child's input if they're old enough. You've clarified when exceptions can be made and how to handle unexpected situations. You also know how to discuss exceptions with other adults when needed.

One of the best ways to reinforce these rules is to make them visual. A simple chart or graph can help make rules clear and easy to understand. For example, create a weekly schedule from Monday to Sunday. If Thursday is ice cream day, mark it on the chart with an ice cream symbol. If screen time is one hour after dinner, place a tablet or TV symbol on the relevant days. Apply the same approach to sweets, pocket money, or even hygiene routines like hair washing.

A visual chart provides clarity for your entire family. It clearly shows what happens each day of the week, making it easier for your child to understand and follow the rules. Of course, communication is still essential. Even though they know Thursday is ice cream day, they might still test the limits. Depending on their age, it could take anywhere from a week to a few months for the rule to become fully accepted.

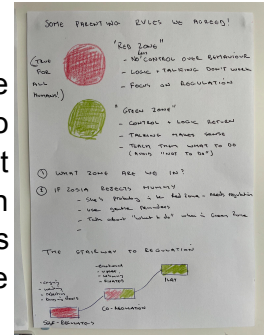
A rule is like a law - we may not always like it, but we respect it. If your child asks for ice cream on Wednesday, you can confidently say, "Darling, today's Wednesday. Tomorrow is ice cream day." When they understand this in advance, they're less likely to argue or beg.

Starting this early helps children adapt faster.



Even very young children can understand visual rules. In my own family, we used pictures to reinforce behaviors we wanted to encourage. We had a terrible time with my daughter going to preschool years ago, so we created a simple visual chart to help her to learn how to get ready.

Rules don't have to only be for kids. To the right you can see an example of visual rules I created with my wife, Maja, to help us deal with our children's meltdowns. A lot of the frustration we felt at each other was because we were reacting to the same external situation (our daughter's meltdown) completely differently. When you have rules established, you all sing from the same hymn sheet! And visual rules are just the absolute best way to do so.



Step 5: Use Empathy When Your Child Wants to Break Rules

So what's empathy? Let's start with a classic example where parents often become tetchy quickly.

"Mom, can I have some chocolate?"

Typical responses might be: "No, because it's not healthy," "No, you've already eaten," or "No, we have chocolate at home." The problem is that as soon as a child hears "no," they stop listening. Everything that follows is just noise to them. They think, "If you said no, why should I listen to your reasons?"

A strong "no" should be reserved for emergency situations, in the meantime, instead of getting angry, get empathetic. What does that look like? Instead of jumping straight to "no," try acknowledging their request:

"Mom, can I have some chocolate?"

A better response might be: "I know you really want chocolate. It's yummy. Dessert is for after dinner."

Why does this work? Because when children feel heard, they are more likely to accept boundaries. If they keep repeating, "But I want chocolate," it's because they don't feel their request was acknowledged. They asked for chocolate, and you responded with an unrelated offer, like an apple or "later."

Think of this in an adult situation. Imagine you see a pair of shoes you really want, and your partner says, "You already have five pairs like that," or "Have you seen the price?" Your response would likely be, "Yeah, so what?" The same applies to kids. They want to feel heard before they consider your reasons.

There are three conditions where empathy is crucial. First, use it when your child asks for something you can't or don't want to provide. Show them you respect their feelings: "I understand why you want that toy. I know you love Lego."

Second, use empathy when you ask your child to do something, and they refuse. Instead of demanding, acknowledge their feelings:

"I get why you don't feel like brushing your teeth. When I was your age, I felt the same way."

"I know you'd rather play than do your homework."

"I understand why you don't want to clean your room when your friends are waiting for you."

Empathy satisfies a child's Need for Relatedness. It helps them feel seen and heard. When they sense that you understand, they become more open to cooperating. They might not always like the rule, but they will feel respected—and that makes all the difference.

In my personal experience, this is a skill which takes time to learn and may even feel or sound hollow to your ears, when inside you feel angry and frustrated. Keep practising empathy until it's automatic. Automatic empathy also gives you a pause between your instinctive reaction and allows you to think "what rule do I need to refer to here." It's also an opportunity to reflect on whether the behaviour you're judging emotionally is one you also demonstrate, which is the source of a LOT of frustration for parents as we discussed at the end of Module 2.

Step 5: 'Set the Stage To Stop the Rage'

A while ago, I took my kids to the store to pick up books and activities for an upcoming flight. Before we even stepped inside, I set the stage by explaining what we could and couldn't buy. We were there for puzzles and travel games, not for toys, stuffed animals, or extra snacks. I also set a budget so they knew exactly what to expect.

Sure enough, as soon as we walked in, they started asking for toys. Instead of a power struggle, I calmly reminded them, "Remember what I said in the car? We're here for puzzles and travel games." That was it—no whining, no begging, and no tantrums. Since they already knew the rules before we even walked in, there was no battle to fight.

Children live in the moment and don't always think ahead. When we suddenly tell them, "Time to go!" It feels like an ambush. They resist, not out of defiance, but because their brain wasn't prepared for the transition. The solution is to set the stage in advance so they know what to expect.

Instead of catching them off guard, use simple cues. For example, say, "In 10 minutes, we're heading out," rather than, "We're leaving now." Let them finish an episode before turning off the TV instead of stopping it abruptly. Giving kids a warning helps them mentally prepare.

Young kids struggle with understanding time, so making it visible can help. Use a timer, give countdown reminders, or tie it to something they understand, like finishing an episode. When they can see, hear, or measure time, transitions feel much smoother.

Consistency is key. If you say, "We're leaving in five minutes," but actually let them play for 15, they'll learn your words don't mean much. Follow through on what you say, and over time, they will trust you and resist less. The more predictable you are, the fewer battles you'll have.

Step 6: Praise the Positive Behavior

Focusing on what your child does well reinforces those behaviors and strengthens their ability to follow rules and boundaries. When you acknowledge positive actions, your child feels valued and motivated to repeat them. Since adults often notice problems more than successes, making a conscious effort to highlight rule-following behavior is essential.

To do this effectively, recognize the trait behind the action and explain its benefits. If your child puts a screwdriver back in the toolbox, don't just say, "Thanks." Instead, say, "Thank you for putting the screwdriver back. That shows you are organized. Being organized helps you keep track of things and follow through on responsibilities." (If this is awkward for you, try your own version).

When your child follows a household rule, such as putting their smartphone away at the agreed time, reinforce the habit. Say, "I appreciate that you put your phone away when the time was up. That shows responsibility, and it helps us maintain healthy screen time limits." This connects their action to the importance of boundaries and self-discipline.

If your child helps without being asked, like carrying a heavy bag or clearing the table after dinner, highlight their thoughtfulness. Say, "That was considerate. You noticed what needed to be done and took action. Being aware of others' needs makes you a great team player." (This may sound artificial to you, so find your own way of phrasing it).

Even small actions like brushing their teeth without reminders can reinforce the idea of personal responsibility. Instead of just saying, "Well done," try, "You remembered to take care of your teeth without being reminded. That shows independence and helps keep you healthy." If a teenager comes home on time, say, "Thank you for keeping your promise. That shows responsibility and helps me trust you more when you go out." (Again, find your own way to say this)

By explaining why rules and boundaries matter, your child understands their value. This builds confidence and increases motivation. Encouragement makes cooperation easier and helps establish lifelong respect for limits and guidelines.

Step 7: Offer 2 Options Within Limits

A child's brain is still developing and won't fully mature until around age 25. Their ability to make decisions is limited, so vague or open-ended questions can create anxiety. Imagine shopping for

jeans and being asked to pick one from 55 different styles - overwhelming, right? Now, think about how much harder it is for a child.

This is called the paradox of choice - the more options we have, the harder it is to decide. That's why offering two or three options without a framework can backfire. If you ask, "Do you want pea soup or chicken soup?" they might say "French fries." If you ask, "What trousers do you want to wear?" they might say, "I'm wearing a skirt." The key is setting a clear limit first, then offering choices within that boundary.

Some parents offer too many choices, while others issue commands with no room for decision-making. Saying, "Get in the car, please," or "Eat your food, please," is still authoritarian, even if said politely. Without a sense of autonomy, children may resist more to regain control.

We look to find the middle ground. Instead of open-ended questions or rigid commands, set a clear limit and offer choices within it. For example, instead of saying, "Time to brush your teeth," say, "Before bed, your teeth should be clean. Do you want to brush before or after your bedtime story? It's your choice." This approach respects the child's autonomy while maintaining structure.

Similarly, instead of saying, "Sit at the table and eat your soup," say, "I'd like you to eat healthy food. Would you prefer soup or chicken? It's your choice." Instead of "Dress up, it's raining," say, "It's raining, and you need to wear something warm. Would you like to wear this jacket or that one?" The child still makes a decision, but within a clear boundary.

This technique satisfies a child's need for autonomy while reinforcing the importance of rules. When a child knows their boundaries but still has some control, cooperation increases. You can use this method in everyday situations - "Which chair do you want to sit in?" or "Do you want to turn off the TV, or should I do it?" The earlier you start, the more natural it becomes.

Step 8: Be Careful With Exceptions

One of the biggest pitfalls parents fall into is making exceptions to rules and boundaries so frequently that they become the new norm.

Take bedtime, for example. You expect your child to brush their teeth every night before bed. But one evening, after a long day, they fell asleep in the car. You're exhausted too, so when they ask, "Can I just go straight to bed?" you agree. That's a reasonable exception. The problem arises when exceptions like this start happening regularly, turning a once-clear rule into something flexible and negotiable.

Another example is sweets (aka as candy). Your family might have a rule about eating only healthy sweets. However, when attending a birthday party, you allow your child to have cake. Instead of saying, "You can't eat that," you can frame it as, "In our family, we eat healthy sweets, but today is a special occasion, so you can have a piece of cake." This keeps the boundary clear while allowing for special moments.

For exceptions to work, they need to be communicated clearly. Let your child know, "This is an exception because it's a special event, but we'll return to our usual rule tomorrow." If exceptions become frequent, they stop being exceptions and start eroding the original boundary.

To maintain consistency, think ahead. What predictable events—holidays, birthdays, vacations—might warrant exceptions? Set these in advance so your child understands when and why exceptions happen. This way, boundaries stay intact, and rules remain meaningful.

Step 9: Use the Power of Personal Responsibility



This technique is especially useful when your child refuses to do something—whether it's picking up their toys, changing their clothes, brushing their teeth, or doing their homework. Instead of insisting and creating resistance and micromanaging them, shift the responsibility to them.

For example, instead of saying, "Change your wet socks or you'll catch a cold," reframe it: "It's your body, and you know best how to take care of it. If your feet are cold, you can ask me for dry socks." This approach helps your child take ownership of their choices without feeling forced. The more you push, the more they resist,

so giving them responsibility makes them more likely to cooperate.

There is something magical about the words "you are in charge" and honouring and validating that thought by *actually letting your child be more responsible for their own actions and life - regardless of whether you think they are doing it properly or not!*

Here's the principle: the more responsible they are in 1 area the more responsible they are in all areas of their life.

Use open-ended questions to guide them toward making responsible choices. Instead of, "You *will* fall if you climb that tree," say, "It's possible you might fall. I trust you to make the right decision" Shifting from absolute statements to responsibility encourages your child to think through their actions rather than dismissing your warnings (some parents may not have the risk appetite for this, but you get the meaning).

You can also reinforce responsibility in everyday tasks. If you're at the park, instead of demanding, "Pick up your toys," try, "Have you found all your toys? How many did you bring?"

To embed this mindset, assign age-appropriate responsibilities. A two-year-old can carry their plate to the sink, while a five-year-old can help load the dishwasher. They might also start sorting their laundry or watering plants. These small tasks nurture their autonomy and competence, helping them grow into responsible individuals. You can then add this to Step 6 where you praise positive behaviour.

So - pick an area of your child's life where you can trust them, and let them know!

Step 10 - Use “When Then”

This is a brilliant technique which you can use to swap out using the word “no” all the time for a simple reminder of the rules and routine you now have in your family.

The idea is straightforward: establish a sequence where responsibility comes before privilege. Rather than nagging or becoming angry, you calmly state the order of events. For example, you might say, "When you wash your hands, then we can eat dinner," or, "When you clean up your toys, then we can read a story." You might also say, "When you brush your teeth, then we can cuddle before bed." This is not a bribe. You are not offering something extra in exchange for cooperation. You are simply setting a structure: first we handle responsibilities, then we enjoy privileges. It reflects the natural order of things.

When we eat dinner, then we eat dessert. It's that simple.

This approach is effective and can reduce shouting. If you have ever found yourself repeating instructions endlessly, only to raise your voice in frustration, this method offers a clearer path. Instead of saying, "Wash your hands! I already told you!" or, "How many times do I have to say clean your room?" you allow the consequences to speak for themselves. First we wash our hands, then we eat. First we tidy our toys, then we go play. When we brush our teeth, then we get a bedtime story. When we've done our homework, then we get our phone time.

You remove the power struggle and let your child choose, while you maintain the structure.

The "when-then" technique is not a bribe. A bribe sounds like, "If you wash your hands, I'll give you a cookie." That approach uses a reward to buy compliance. "When-then" simply establishes a logical sequence: one thing happens, then the next. There is no added reward, only a clear structure of expectations.

Nor is this method about controlling your child. It is about teaching responsibility. Your child can choose not to follow through, but the outcome remains unchanged. The control lies in the structure, not in your tone or emotional reaction.

Use when then when the word 'no' is on your lips - it takes a bit of practice but it becomes second nature quickly!

Step 11 - Get Your Partner On Board (the Smart Way)

Setting rules and boundaries for children is an essential part of parenting, but what happens when your partner or co-parent disagrees on how to enforce them? Differences in parenting styles, values, and expectations can create tension, but they don't have to lead to constant conflict. Instead, they can become an opportunity to build mutual understanding and cooperation.

One of the first steps in bridging the gap is recognizing that people set boundaries when their values feel challenged. If your partner resists a particular rule, it's likely because it contradicts something they hold important. For example, one parent may emphasize discipline and routine, while the other values flexibility and spontaneity. Instead of viewing these differences as obstacles, consider them as insights into what each person prioritizes. The key is to frame the conversation around both perspectives, rather than making it a debate about who is "right" or "wrong."

When discussing rules with partners or co-parents, explain your perspective in terms that resonate with your partner's values. Instead of saying, "We need to limit screen time because I said so," try, "I know you value our child being independent and creative. Setting a screen time rule will help them develop more hobbies and social skills." By linking your request to something your partner values, you increase the likelihood of cooperation.

So what are your partner or co-partner's values?

1. What activities or tasks do they consistently prioritize, even when they are busy?
2. What do they spend most of their money on without hesitation?
3. What topics do they enjoy discussing or learning about the most?
4. What types of achievements or moments make them feel the most proud?
5. What do they have around them?

When you connect the rules to THEIR values, a profound shift takes place. I worked with a family where a Mum was asking her husband to write the family rules with and for their 5 year old son. He resisted. When it turned out he was an architect, I suggested she invite him to draw the rules and - hey presto! - he agreed. That's how profound placing yourself in someone else's values can be.

Another effective strategy is to establish common ground. Many disagreements over parenting stem from fears—fear of being too strict, too lenient, or making the wrong choices. Instead of assuming your partner is against rules, explore where you do align. You might agree that routines help children feel secure, that teaching responsibility is important, or that kids should learn respect. Starting from shared beliefs allows you to shape rules together in a way that both parents feel comfortable with.

It's also helpful to create clear but flexible agreements. Just as people establish financial agreements to balance different spending habits, setting rules for parenting works best when each person has some input. If one parent wants strict bedtime rules and the other prefers a relaxed approach, a middle-ground agreement might be setting a bedtime window rather than a fixed time. This allows structure without feeling overly rigid.

The More You Insist, The More They Resist

In any relationship, resistance arises when one person feels controlled or dismissed. If you demand that your partner enforce a strict bedtime or limit screen time, they may instinctively

push back—not because they oppose the rule itself, but because they resist feeling dictated to. This is a natural psychological response. When people feel their autonomy is threatened, they defend it, often by doing the opposite of what is asked.

It's wise to understand where in your relationship you are repressing/suppressing and where they are correspondingly "expressing."

A Final Thought

If you've implemented these 10 steps and your child is still breaking your rules, then it's time to finally start talking about discipline. That's what we start to implement when we're sure we've done everything we can to help teach our children and introduce order through rules. We'll be doing that in Module 5.

Remember - we only apply these steps when we're absolutely sure (a) we've worked on our stress score and (b) we know the WHY of our kid's behaviour.