

Setting Up for Success: Establishing Household Rules

In each house and family, household rules and expectations evolve organically over time and will change with the natural ebb and flow of the family. A child raised in your home from infancy knows how “things go” because they are a part of your family’s shared experiences, habits, routines, and culture.

Whether a child is entering your home through foster care or adoption, or whether a child is entering your home as a relative, there might be an expectation that the child entering into your care will “catch on” to the household rules; it isn’t always that simple. Remember, that child comes to you with their own family’s culture, rules, and routines. Even relatives have different ways of doing things that change from house to house. The rules and routines may be dramatically different than your own. Even if the child came from an environment with few rules, this is their “normal.” Letting a child know how things work in your home as early as possible can help them better navigate a possibly frightening transition.

Initial Meeting

Ask any child who has been through the “initial meeting” process with a potential caregiver, and they will tell you that their greatest fear is all the unknowns. This initial meeting with the child, the case manager, and the child’s parent(s) or previous caregiver is an opportunity to learn about

one another, share vital information, and hopefully discover common and familiar rules that can provide much-needed consistency and comfort. Although we don’t traditionally think of “setting down rules” as a warm and fuzzy way to introduce a child to your home, discussing household rules and expectations can help predict a chaotic and uncertain time. It also may offer reassurance that they will be safe in your home. For example, if a child comes from a home where there was a lot of fighting and domestic violence, they may feel reassured that yelling and hitting are not allowed in your home.



Basic Rule Setting

Rules will differ for each family, but some basics are excellent guidelines.

- Keep rules simple and few, especially in the beginning.
- Stick to the basics without getting specific and detailed.
- Use positive language where possible (do vs. don’t).
- If needed, post a *short* written list.
- Be clear about the “why” behind the rule.

When household rules are “big” enough to cover basic codes of conduct within the family, children with particular issues or behaviors are not singled out or shamed. For example, a child who has suffered sexual abuse may have specific safety rules. It may, however, be good practice for the entire

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family to have rules about keeping bedroom doors open unless changing, having only one person in the bathroom at a time, or being clothed when exiting the bedroom or bathroom. And while some of these rules may be a given in your family, you can't assume they are for the child.

Some families have opted to limit family rules to a few general categories:

- Be Safe
- Be Respectful
- Be Responsible

The family then defines what being safe, respectful, or responsible looks like for their family. For example, "Be Safe" may include no hitting, no running in the house, no bringing strangers into the house, and supervised internet use. "Be Respectful" may include no profanity, no name calling, no taking things that don't belong to you, no damaging property, no phone calls after 10 pm, and respecting others' privacy. "Be Responsible" may include cleaning up after yourself, taking care of assigned chores, being home by curfew, and keeping music at a reasonable volume.

Involving the Child and Family Members

Children, especially teens, can learn from talking with you about the house rules and what and why you expect particular behavior from them. Family meetings where family members can discuss their needs, wants, and problems with specific rules can be particularly helpful. Be open to modifying rules where appropriate. Remember that you are merging two families when someone from another family is entering your home. They might also like to bring some rules and expectations to benefit your home. Buy-in and accountability are more manageable when everyone agrees on the rules. Since behavior equals communication, remember to discuss one-on-one with children in areas

where they are struggling. Don't forget to also talk about what's working well, too!

One foster dad shared that, although some household rules are non-negotiable, he has found it effective to hold family meetings and collectively determine the rules. This is done each time a new person becomes a part of the family and continues on an ongoing basis. "When the whole family has input and an opportunity to discuss and agree to the rules, we're much better at holding one another responsible. It's also a chance to explain that the rules aren't meant to be restrictive or punishing; they're meant to keep everyone safe and happy. If everyone has input, no one can say 'I didn't know' or 'It's unfair!'"

Rules vs. Routines

It may be helpful to distinguish between "rules" and "routines." One way to think about it is that household rules should apply to pretty much everyone in the household. On the other hand, "routines" may differ from family member to family member and depend on age, developmental stage, or other particular circumstances. These may include curfews, bedtime, bathing schedules, snack times, or assigned chores.

It is also important that you don't assume that a child didn't have routines before they entered your home. They might have a bedtime routine they did with their parents that helped them fall asleep, or perhaps they have afternoon snacks that comfort them. Ask them if they did anything at home that you could continue doing with them. This could add to their feeling of safety and welcome.

Again, with *any* rules in your home, remember there will be a transition period. While your rules may represent a baseline for behavior expectations, remember that trauma and history play into the lives of every child. If a particular rule or expectation seems to be a trigger for a child, try not to assume defiance on the part of the child. They are

communicating with you through their behaviors. Ask yourself (and the child) what made this rule a struggle for them. (For example, they may feel unsafe if they can't snack whenever they want.)

By creating reasonable household rules and expectations that the children in your care can achieve, you will promote stability, consistency, safety, self-esteem, and overall well-being.



Resources

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Let's Talk: Preparing Your Home to Welcome a Child](#)