

Household Structure

Every kid needs to learn that the choices they make lead to the consequences they have. If they learn this early, then they will make better choices later in life – in fact, they will tend to make sacrifices later in life, rather than seeking instant-gratification. In order to learn this skill, they must be taught the connection between their choices and the outcomes they experience.

This is no easy task. As adults, you appreciate how complex the world of cause and effect really is – you no doubt, realize that there are many factors far outside your control that greatly affect your current situation – economic factors, political factors, being in a certain time and place, etc. And yet, you also can see how many of the choices you made have brought you to where you are today – a decision to marry, to become educated, to make financial investments, etc. Kids cannot sort through all the complexities of cause-and-effect in the adult world. In fact, until they become teens, the only reason they do what they're told is because someone tells them to do it! Some kids don't grow past this stage – they end up in rebellion or in mindless compliance during their teen and early adult years doing what they're told and not thinking and choosing for themselves. If they remain in this stage, they will end up blaming others for their own situation. If they don't get past this stage, they'll lack the ability to make and accept the responsibilities for those choices. They need our help.

Parents often know instinctively what is right or wrong, but often do not take the time to set these ideas into a simple structure of rules, consequences, and incentives. Instead they parent from crisis-mode or when they are emotional. Kids get confused by this kind of parenting because they are responding to their parents emotion much more than the ideas behind them. Creating a simple structure at home early in your kids development will help them greatly in these areas. The kind of structure is a government of sorts, with you as the authority.

Several important factors are part of this structure:

1. **Responsibilities:** The structure should delegate some form of responsibility to the children – it must be age-appropriate. For most kids this is limited to rules which define “in-bounds” and “out-of-bounds” (e.g., no cussing, no violence, no drugs/alcohol, start homework at 6pm, come home by 10pm, etc.) and household chores. Like any responsibility, a “job description” is helpful for the kid to understand what they are to do – rules and duties need to be clearly spelled out, see below for “how-to.” Many of the parents I work with have never clearly defined what the job duties for rules and chores are. This leaves their kids confused or it offers endless opportunities for debates that do nothing but zap energy.
2. **Freedoms or privileges:** Parents are the source of freedoms and privileges. Many parents never stop to verbalize to their kids *in a non-problem time* how the freedoms and privileges they give to their kid are “paid” by the adult – instead, many parents explain this fact when the emotions are heated, and the kid is so angry they cannot hear anything. Kids need to understand that their freedoms have come at a cost to their parents. Kids should understand that their own responsibilities are tied to these freedoms in some way – that if they perform their responsibilities, they will have their freedoms – and, conversely, if they do not perform they will be restricted. Explaining this should occur at a time of peace – it should be a teaching moment.
3. **Restriction:** This is what happens when kids do not perform their responsibilities – when they step “out-of-bounds.” These should be clearly spelled out so that kids understand *ahead of time* that if they choose not to fulfill their responsibility, then their consequence will be restriction. Police officers do not figure out what the consequence for breaking speed limits should be when they pull you over – the lawmakers have done that ahead of time, and the cop simply gives the ticket. Parents should have a system already in place before a rule is broken.

4. Incentives: Rewarding kids with something tangible (cash or a gift) for great behavior is a good idea. However, rewarding in this way for behavior that is expected and considered “bare minimum” for their age is probably not a good idea. Remember, freedoms and privileges are the “payment” for doing the bare minimum. Sure you can say thank you, but to pay them is to feed a sense of inappropriate entitlement. For example, if your kids do their homework and they get decent grades, that’s a bare minimum. However, if you create an incentive for them to go “above and beyond” merely the bare minimum, then you may find they will become motivated to excel. Often, the most effective way to do this is to set a minimum (you need to get a 2.8 GPA to stay off restriction) and then give an incentive that is beyond it (if you get a 3.25 you will get \$50 at the end of the semester – for every .25 GPA higher, you get an additional \$25). Set the bar for the incentive to a place that will actually challenge your kid – if they can easily get a 3.25, set the bar at 3.75. Likewise, if it is hard for them to get a 3.0, then set the bar there. This is much like what happens for employees who work extra in order to qualify for certain pay bonuses – they only get the bonus if they go above and beyond what is normally expected. When the kid realizes there is a reward, they may begin to choose to make sacrifices that will NOT be tied to doing things “because mommy and daddy said so” but rather tied to an understanding that THEY control their own destiny. For incentives to work properly, you must sit your kids down and tell them what you will do for them if they go above and beyond what is normally expected. Then when they do, keep your promise. Be careful to assess if you can afford to keep those promises before you make them!
5. Rules to govern all these areas: Parents should have clear rules in all these areas that both they and their kids can state in simple term. The best rules define something that is specific and observable such as, “be in the house at 8pm on weeknights: or “no clothes on the floor of your bedroom.”. All rules imply a “do” or “don’t” and have some kind of time limit, such as, “do the dishes right after eating” or “don’t go outside until I get home.” Rules should be clear and not open to debate: a clear rule has observable measurable behaviors, “do not kick, hit, or physically hurt your brother” – a less clear rule lacks observable or measurable behaviors: “do not be cruel to your brother.” A good test of whether you have effective rules is to have a stranger ask your kids, “what are the rules of the house” and see whether the kids say something like what is listed on the page below about making an effective rule. See below for more info.

An example of a good home structure:

The situation

Two parents came to work with me who had difficulty with their 11 year-old daughter who was not paying attention in class, “forgetting” to write down her homework, not getting to her after-school tutoring, not doing any homework in the tutoring when she attended, spending too much time on homework at night, and asking the parents for too much help every night with that homework. Additionally, she was failing two classes and had two Cs and a D to boot. The child was friendly, and generally compliant towards the parents, but whined, cried, and complained about not understanding her work – the child mainly wanted the parents to spend their whole evenings with her doing the homework together. The parents were frustrated, tired, and demoralized over her poor grades.

The Analysis

The parents expected their daughter to be understand what she was supposed to do without really spelling it out. Instead, in their frustration, they told her what was expected – this served to upset the child who would sulk. The father didn’t want to “be the teacher” at home and expected the daughter to pay attention in class – he harped on her that “if she’d pay attention in school, we wouldn’t have these problems at night.” The mother agreed, but constantly helped her daughter with homework because she feared failing grades – this caused tension between the mother and father. The mother complained that she had no way to get her daughter to go to tutoring because the daughter always had an excuse why she couldn’t go (some excuses actually seemed reasonable too).

The Proposal:

After two meetings, I helped the parents develop the following rules, consequences and incentives:

1. Rule: all assignments must be written in day-planner and teacher must sign to affirm that the child wrote them down accurately. Consequence – restriction that evening from all entertainment.
Incentive – none
2. Rule: child will attend tutoring. Consequence – for every hour of missed tutoring, child will clean house for an hour on weekend. Incentive – none
3. Rule: child will complete at least 7 problems (which is considered reasonable by the tutor) from math homework during tutoring. Consequence – if not, client will not have free-time after school, but do homework directly. Incentive – if client gets 15 or more done, client will have 30 minutes free-time when she gets home.
4. Rule: child will be given 4 “help me” cards per night that she can spend asking questions about homework. Parents will help her for each card. Consequence- after cards are spent, no help is given. Child may “buy” more cards by agreeing to do 30 minutes of chores for each card.

Conclusion

The parents stopped getting frustrated – each infraction had a pres-set consequence, and the parents knew what to do with non-compliance. They got the house cleaned faster on weekends, and noticed that their daughter was changing her ways. The child became motivated to work with her tutor in order to get her problems done, so she’d have free-time at home. The parents felt they had more control, and they found they were helping their daughter with less trivial matters during the evening homework. They reported increased satisfaction at home, and no longer needed to see me.

Evaluate the structure you have at home using the following questions:

Responsibilities:

- What responsibilities do the children have? What chores or tasks must they do?
- Think of one of these responsibilities – can you give a “job descriptions” for it? Can your kids?
- Do the kids understand that completing these responsibility “earns” them freedoms and privileges?

Freedoms or privileges: Other than food, clothing, and shelter, everything you provide for your kid is a privilege...

- Can you name the top five privileges that your kids enjoy...(think technology, fun, etc)
- What other privileges or freedoms do your children enjoy (think being outside, having friends over, doing special things that cost money...)?
- Does your child understand that these freedoms and privileges cost something? Do they understand that these are given to them as the result of doing their responsibility? Do they understand that you control these freedoms?

Restriction:

- Name the **objects or things** you can restrict children from using (think objects like TV, DVD, computer, X-box, bicycle, surfboard, car, money, etc.)
- Name the **activities** you can restrict your child from doing (think: going outside, going to friends homes, having friends over, going to fun places, attending fun activities, etc.)
- Name the activities you can force your child to do (think: not-fun activities, like cleaning, yard work, extra chores, sitting quietly at times they prefer to be doing other things, making the girls watch football, making the boys watch soap operas, etc.)

Incentives:

- Do you have any incentive in place to motivate your child to go “above and beyond”?
- Pretend that your child can earn all Bs with normal effort – if you wanted to motivate them to earn As (which would require them to put in extra effort), what would you promise to them at the end of each report card if they got As?

Rules to govern these areas:

Consider the following areas – what are the rules now, and what should they be?

- Rules about coming and going from the home – who is coming/going, what are they doing, when will they return, where are they going and with whom?
- Rules about homework – when is it done, where and how is it done, who checks to see that it is done satisfactorily, how do parents communicate with teachers about problems and accountability?
- Rules about play – when is play allowed, where, with whom?
- Rules about safety – what is unsafe or “out of bounds” and why?
- Rules about communication – what specific behaviors define being “respectful” or “disrespectful” - are children allowed to express anger – have you told the the difference between appropriate and inappropriate ways to express their negative feelings?
- Rules about boundaries – what is defined as personal space or property, who has privacy and when, what are the rules about sharing?
- Rules about sleeping, eating, hygiene – when, where, what, how often, etc.

Making effective rules:

Use measurable or observable behaviors that are clear:

1. 9 year-old: Jane will rinse then put the dishes in the dishwasher **NOT** Jane will clean-up after dinner
2. 13 year-old: Billy will sit at his desk quietly, doing his homework **NOT** Billy will get good grades
3. 17 year-old: Joe will mow the lawn and trim the hedge **NOT** Joe will do the gardening

Give time frames:

1. 9 year-old: Jane will rinse then put the dishes in the dishwasher *after meals*
2. 13 year-old: Billy will sit at his desk quietly, doing his homework *from 4 till 5:30*
3. 17 year-old: Joe will mow the lawn and trim the hedge *by Saturday at noon*.

Give consequences for non-compliance:

1. 9 year-old: Jane will loose TV for evening if she does not put dishes in washer after meals; if she still refuses, Jane will loose TV for three days.
2. 13 year-old: For every minute Billy is not doing his homework, he will do 2 minutes of yard-work on weekends. Additionally, he will be on restriction from all forms of entertainment (computer, TV, phones, video-games, I-Pod, etc.) as well as going out or having friends over for the remainder of the evening or until he completes his work.
3. 17 year-old: Joe will loose driving privileges for weekend if lawn/ hedge are not complete. For every minute-late lawn/hedge is not completed, Joe will also owe parents 2 additional minutes of labor the following day.

Decide which authority figure will hold the child accountable:

1. Both parents will not excuse Jane from dinner area until dishes are put in washer; both will state the consequence for non-compliance and also make sure she does not have TV access.
2. Mom will make sure Billy is at his desk and quiet - she will also check homework at the end to make sure he did it. If he refuses, she will remind him of the consequence and enforce until he complies.
3. Dad will check lawn/hedge Saturday at noon and enforce consequence for Joe as well as keeping track of time if the job gets done late. Dad and mom will choose what extra work will be done the next day when applicable.