

The Ground Rules

Help your family resolve conflict with this Bible-based model.

by Dr. Rick Fowler & Jerilyn Fowler

"No son of mine is going to school looking like a confused cockatoo!"

I heard Rick loudly declaring from the downstairs bathroom. Our son Chip was in sixth grade at the time and had just moved from the "I care nothing about my appearance" phase into the "My unique looks will totally define my coolness to my peers" phase. As his parents, Rick and I were both struggling. The clothes, the hair, the attitude—this was all new territory for us.

We had, I admit, skirted the perimeter of this alien place with his older sister. But her serious, conservative nature had made for only a few short trips off the straight and narrow. Chip was a different story. We knew his adventuresome, on-the-edge spirit was going to be a major challenge to our nerves, our comfort level, perhaps even our sanity.

I heard the bathroom door slam and Chip's voice rise in irritation.

I sighed. How many times that week had he and his dad clashed over everything from television shows to bedtime? We definitely needed a better system to hash out these issues with both of our children. We needed a way for our family to work through issues objectively. Responding on a purely emotional level wasn't working for anyone.

After his run-in with Chip, Rick felt as defeated as I did and agreed there had to be a better way. We prayed, we talked, we went to the Scriptures and to more experienced friends for counsel. What we ended up with is a model for handling conflict that has made a tremendous difference in the lives of every member of our family. We believe it works so well because it's

based on three scriptural principles: God's unchanging nature, human responsibility, and grace.

These three principles are made clear in Matthew 11:28-30, which became our family's guiding passage. It says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Although our children are now grown, they have often cited the model that grew out of these wonderful verses as playing a vital role in the strength of their faith, as well as their understanding of Scripture and God himself.

The Core of the Matter

We introduced this new way of handling problems one night after dinner. We got out the Bible and read the passage from Matthew. Then we explained how it related to our family.

We told our children that without God's absolutes to guide us, our lives become weary with confusion and burdened with sin. To avoid these conditions, we need to pay close attention to our source of peace and rest: Jesus. In verse 29, Jesus says to learn from him. He also tells us that there is a yoke to shoulder—basically, we need to submit willingly to his authority. That's where responsibility comes in.

To help our children picture the analogy Jesus was making, we discussed the fact that in Bible days a young ox was yoked together with an older, more experienced ox—one that knew what the master expected and could keep the plowing and farming routines running smoothly and safely. It wasn't punishment; it was a way to help the young ox learn to follow the right path. Jesus asks for a willingness to learn and a willingness to cooperate.

Finally, we explained, Jesus offers us grace. He promises that his authority is kind, gentle, and respectful of our personhood and needs.

Absolutes

At the center of this model are the absolutes of Scripture. These are the unchanging commands of an unchanging, righteous God. As you establish these absolutes, we recommend starting with the Ten Commandments. Some of these commands

have more to do with children and home-life than do others, so feel free to prioritize them accordingly.

It's a good idea to read these absolutes straight from the Bible (use a children's Bible if you have kids under 6). It's important for children to know that this is what God tells us all to do.

From there, move on to the New Testament with Jesus' commands to his followers and Paul's admonitions to the early Christians. Be sure to include commands for adults, too. A child receives a deep sense of security when she realizes that everyone in the family takes what God says seriously. It might also be helpful to discuss why God gave us particular commands, because this helps children see God's wisdom and goodness. Tell them that following God's commands is how we show our love for God.

Besides the Ten Commandments, our absolutes included:

- Be kind and forgive others (Eph. 4:32).
- Treat your body as the Temple of God (1 Cor. 6:19-20).
- Husbands, love your wives sacrificially (Eph. 5:25, 33).
- Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord and respect them (Eph. 5:22, 33).
- Give to God's work (2 Cor. 9:6-8).
- Children, honor and obey your parents (Eph. 6:1-3).
- Do not provoke your children, but carefully teach them about God (Eph. 6:4).
- Do not be bound together with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14).
- Respect those in authority (Rom. 13:1).
- Do not lie to one another (Col. 3:9).
- Do not use coarse, filthy language (Eph. 5:4).
- Do your work the best you can (Col. 3:23).

Out of these core absolutes, your family's individual house rules develop.

House Rules

House rules are simply ways that parents help children (and one another) flesh out the absolutes of Scripture. Children begin to see the Word of God as relevant to their lives and vital to their family union. House rules should never be used to validate parental power, but rather as a careful and just way to uphold the values of Scripture, and to keep your home the haven of peace, security, and love God intends it to be.

Unlike scriptural absolutes, house rules are fluid and tend to fluctuate as children grow and change. Usually between two to four house rules will emerge from a core absolute at any given time. For example, 1 Cor. 6:19-20 tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, so we must treat them wisely. If you have a 5-year-old, that might translate into house rules concerning appropriate bedtime, proper eating habits, or not being allowed to ride the go-cart on a busy street.

As the child grows, new house rules will grow out of the same absolutes. For teenagers, the same passage might lead to rules for modesty and appropriateness in appearance; rules concerning alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; guidelines concerning what movies they see or what music they listen to.

Parents have house rules as well. For us, those house rules relate primarily to the way we deal with discipline. Again, discipline was never intended to validate the power of a parent. Rather, discipline validates the unshakeable authority of God's Word and, therefore, the authority he has given us as parents to "train a child in the way he should go." God gives us this authority, not so that we look good, but so that our children's hearts will be completely his.

We must also determine to "put away anger" (Eph. 4:31) when we discipline. The anger of man never works the righteousness of God (James 1:20). Instead, we live by a house rule based on the absolutes on forgiveness and parenting found in Ephesians 4:32 and 6:2.

Finally, because we are to honor others above ourselves (Rom. 12:10), we are committed to listening to the child's side of an issue and considering it thoughtfully (Prov. 15:28, 18:13) before we give consequences.

Humility must be the cloak you wear on this journey. You will need the humility to accept what other people may say or think about your family. You'll have to remind yourself that you have higher goals for your children than a starting place on the basketball team or perfectly pressed khakis.

You will also need humility to admit your mistakes to your children—because you will make them. But a child's faith is truly strengthened and deepened when they are witness to a parent's willing and open humility before God and others. David declared to God in Psalms 18:35, "You stoop down to make me great." Each of us can model greatness to our children through gentle humility.

Grace

Children learn about grace as we model grace, to one another and to them. This model for parenting leaves lots of room for individuality, so children understand that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

One part of grace means letting our children be the unique individuals God designed them to be, with their own tastes and opinions and dreams and, yes, even hairdos. If you choose to give grace, there will undoubtedly be times when both you and your children will look a little foolish—in the short run. But over the long haul, you will have shown your children that they are loved for who they are, not what they look like.

Too often, we force our children to abide by our opinions, tastes, desires, and demands as though obedience were the primary goal of parenting. We may get great looking results for a while, but Paul wisely warns us against exasperating our children (Eph. 6:4). A lack of grace often leads to rebellion as children look for ways to express the freedom they were created to enjoy. While their efforts are often tragically misguided, their desire to be themselves is rooted in their God-given need to figure out their place in the world.

From the time God placed Adam and Eve in the garden, he gave them grace. Adam and Eve had many choices. Only one tree out of the whole garden was off limits. Grace allows choices to be made—good ones and not so good ones. Children who are given the blessing of choice within a solid core of absolutes are children whose hearts easily, willingly, freely turn toward their Creator, whose "yoke is easy" and whose "burden is light."

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