

Consistency: Building a Firm Foundation

I consider consistency to be one of the most essential tools in working with children. Without it, nothing you apply will be successful. I think of it as equivalent to laying a strong, even, sturdy foundation for a house. No matter how many fancy embellishments you may add further down the line, if your foundation isn't solid, your house will collapse.

Providing consistency for children means providing a stable environment where the rules do not change. Children know what to expect and so do not experience the anxiety of trying to keep up with constantly shifting expectations. They know what is required of them and so are able to develop a sense of responsibility. Having unchanging family rules can also make enforcing these rules so much easier. I can express sympathy for a child who doesn't want to wash their hands, while at the same time shrugging my shoulders, and saying, "I understand that you don't want to, but it is the rule." Nothing personal, that's just the way it is.

As a teacher, I tend to learn best through trial and error. And, as with most things, I have learned the value and necessity of consistency through my own errors. Out of my teaching duo, I have, in the past, tended towards more of an easy-going attitude, wondering "What is really the big deal with allowing exceptions to the rules every once in a while?" This comes less out of a strong urge towards finding joy in spontaneity and rebellion, and more out of a desire to appease a child in the moment. I want to make them happy and I want them to like me. But, when you decide to waive the rules willy-nilly, it confuses the heck out of the children.

It is one thing to have a hard and fast rule – for example, we only eat at the table. It is simple and clear. There aren't a lot of ways to test its construction. Do we eat on the living room floor? No. Do we eat on top of the bathroom cabinets? No. Just at the table. The rule is the same all of the time and for all members of the family. It is easy to understand. Once you make an exception, however, you introduce levels upon levels of chaos and confusion. If we USUALLY eat at the table except for sometimes when dad is tired and mom doesn't feel like holding the line, then the child is left to wonder, "What is it that makes the rule change?" Is it the day? The people around? No. None of the external circumstances have changed, so the child must conclude that what changes the rules is him. Maybe if he cries or throws himself on the floor that will change the rule. The child now has an incentive to negotiate, push back and test limits. The rules have become personal and changeable.

The good news is that it is never too late to go back and set a solid foundation. This will likely require a little bit of planning and a lot of communication between the caregivers in your child's life. It is not enough to be consistent, if the children are getting totally different messages from the adults in their life. So sit down as a team and decide what the rules are. Decide what is important to your family and settle on rules that you will be able to consistently enforce. Decide what things you can let go and consistently let them go. If something has to change, explain to your child why – "We only eat at the table, but this month the kitchen is being renovated so we are making an exception until it is done."

It may initially seem like a lot of work, but in the end, it will make for a simpler life with secure, responsible children.

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