Helping Children Learn to Follow Rules

A child’s ability to follow directions, including rules, is critical to cognitive growth. Consideration of the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of self-control of children to follow directions and rules is critical when developing expectations. When a child’s compliance is coerced, it undermines the development of inner control.

Provide clear rules. A child’s response to classroom rules is affected both by nature, their personality, and nurture, their experiences. Understanding a child’s temperament and past expectations for following rules can help the teacher know who may need more gentle reminders to successfully follow classroom rules. Some general guidelines for increasing a child’s potential for following classroom rules are:

- Make sure you have the child’s attention when the rule is stated or reiterated;
- Use as little verbalization as possible, uncomplicated, simple phrases or single words are best;
- Present rules in different ways (for example using pictures, using words, or using materials they can touch), and in the child’s home language;
- Assume this is the child’s first time hearing this rule; and
- Tell what you want to happen in steps, ask for repetition from the child to check for their understanding of the rule.

Set Expectations as Guidelines Rules, stated as the behavior desired, help a child know what they need to do to fit in and be safe. Young children are more likely to give peer support for following positively stated guidelines than peer pressure to conform to rules stated “negatively.”

Classroom rules should:

- Be created with child involvement;
- Be clear and simple;
- Be few and relevant;
- Be based on a rationale that can be shared with children;
- State what behavior is appropriate;
- Be presented orally and visually;
- Referred to often; and
- Reviewed by the class often to ensure understanding and to check for the need for changes or additional rules.

Responding when rules are not followed The consequences for not following rules should be

- Consistent,
- Logical,
- Close to the time of the event, and
- Instructive in nature.

It is important to review rules that are not followed by a number of children to determine if the rule is easy to understand, relevant, and is presented in pictures as well verbally.

Parent activities to support a child’s ability to follow rules:

- Share classroom rules and the rationale for them with parents.
- Create a display or newsletter about characteristics of rules that children are more likely to follow; positively stated, short, uncomplicated, co-developed by parent and child.
- Encourage parents to talk with their child about examples of rules that they follow at work or in traffic.

References

