

Parenting With Confidence

Testing Your Love by Testing the Limits

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

Our 6-year-old daughter breaks rules when we are not around. For instance, she knows not to enter her brother's room during his naptime. Yet, when our babysitter is here, she breaks the rule and wakes her brother. This is only one of many examples. We have tried to take away privileges, but she continues to break rules. We feel like she is getting a kick out of it. Please help.

Dear Parent,

Of course she is getting a kick out of it. In the absence of accountability, many children challenge or test the limits. In the moment, the thrill of breaking the rule outweighs consideration of the consequences.

When testing the limits becomes an exhausting game, there may be more going on than the occasional thrill of breaking the rules. Perhaps your daughter is enjoying the attention she is getting from you when her misbehavior is discovered. Perhaps the babysitter is not providing adequate care.

Setting limits for our children is an expression of love and security. Imagine a child is testing whether the adults in her life will keep her safe. Imagine a daredevil child who is mischievous and adventurous, who enjoys feeling powerful, just for fun. Testing the limits can be a healthy effort to be independent.

Frequent opposition may be the red flag signaling a child's feelings of frustration,

impulsivity or immaturity. Noncompliance may be a sign your child needs greater guidance. Alternatively, excessive limit testing may be the result of too much of the wrong kind of attention for misbehavior.

Often parents overreact to their child's "bad" behaviors while failing to give adequate notice of their child's "good" behaviors. When you overreact or launch into tirades in response to an unwanted behavior, your child may learn she has the power to get your goat. Negative attention may simply be more exciting than minimal attention received while cooperating with the rules.

In addition to needs for guidance or attention, breaking the rules can also be a child's way of challenging a parent's ambivalence or inconsistency. When adults are worn out, distracted or harboring feelings of uncertainty, bending the rules leads to inconsistency. Children know just when adults will bend. In this fashion, breaking the rules is a wake-up call to the adult in charge.

Here are some guidelines for minimizing opposition and maximizing cooperation. Remember! Changing how we manage children takes persistence and often involves two steps forward and one step back.

- First, get clear about the value behind your rule, and be certain the rule makes sense for your child.
- Pay more attention to reinforcing positive behavior. Social rewards include smiles, hugs, claps or simply comments on the behavior.
- Do *not* talk and offer reasoning when correcting or directing a child. Save the reasoning for later but *not* at the time of misbehavior.
- Actions are more powerful than words in many cases of testing. Your child knows what she did wrong. For example, when your toddler is shaking juice onto the floor, simply taking away the cup will suffice.
- Take your emotion out of parenting. Deliver consequences in a firm, confident

matter-of-fact tone. Bring your voice down, rather than up.

- Be present while parenting. It also helps to stand near a child and maintain eye contact.
- When giving directives or commands, such as rules, emphasize the expected behavior rather than the unwanted behavior. For example, “Use your words,” rather than, “No hitting,” or, “Sit down on the slide,” rather than, “You’re going to break your neck!”
- Be proactive. Before a child tests a rule, communicate the behavioral expectations and connect it to positive outcomes. For example, “Hold my hand and watch quietly and we can shop a little longer,” or, “Keep up the good listening and we’ll read one more book.”
- Try simply correcting. For example, “This is when you say ‘thank you’ to Mommy,” or, “Start over now.”
- When you discover a broken rule, offer an immediate logical consequence. If your daughter wears an inappropriate shirt, have her hand it over. If your son fed half his lunch to the dog, fine him to help pay for the next visit to the vet. Chores make great consequences, so maybe your son will have to spend the afternoon grooming and walking the dog.
- Consequences must be immediate and related to the offense.
- When you correct behavior, do so in a firm and matter-of-fact manner. Be powerful and stern, but avoid taking a child’s negative behavior personally by expressing sarcasm, anger and drama, because such emotion can backfire and provoke more opposition.

When your child breaks a rule on purpose, express your disappointment and set a logical consequence, even if you discover the behavior quite later. Take your time deciding upon a suitable consequence. In this manner, you are being mindful rather than reactive.

A logical consequence for waking her brother might be constant 1:1 quiet time during her

brother's naptime. In this manner, your daughter loses the privilege to play freely while her brother naps. Another logical consequence for waking her brother could be an immediate designated naptime or time out for her while your sitter spends time with her brother. Alternatively, your daughter's bedtime could be set earlier by whatever amount of time his nap was cut short.

When you catch your child's misbehavior, she gains a sense of security that the adults in her life are present to watch and guide her when she trips up. Give your caretaker permission to correct your children, and teach her how you correct any misbehavior. Practice corrections that are brief and matter-of-fact. Pay attention to all the positive behaviors your daughter chooses. Comment upon her fine judgment and her mastery. In this manner, she may have little desire to test your love by testing the limits.

Kay Abrams is a psychologist in private practice in Kensington. Visit her website at www.kayabrams.com to find more articles and to learn about the services she offers parents, families and teens.