



by Karen Stephens

Responding When Children Test Rules for Behavior

“Why does she challenge everything I say or do?! I say sit and she runs. I say run and she sits!”

Does this sound familiar? All children test their parents. We were all kids once and from time to time, we, too, challenged rules. In early elementary school, I remember singing songs in bed at night. (Anything to fend off sleep!) I knew just how many, “Stop singing and go to sleeps!” I could get by with. The sound of Mom’s magazine being briskly plopped down onto the sofa was my cue to shut up and shut up quick. Hey, I was ornery, but not dumb.

I’m not sure how long that nightly two-step went on. I don’t remember doing it intentionally to rile mom. Unconsciously, I just sang right up to her boundary line. Through many interactions, mom taught me her limits and I’d learned not to cross them. But I admit, I’d toe right up to the edge of them on occasion. Exasperating kid, wasn’t I — yet typical.

Limit testing like that is a proverbial parent-child separation ritual. It’s an age-old tug-of-war between a child’s desire for more freedom and need for dependence on parents.

Even when you do everything “by the book,” kids challenge rules. They go beyond ethical bounds and push you to your absolute limit of patience. Kids often pick public battle grounds to launch a show-down. (Toy aisle at the store ring a bell?)

Asserting individual freedoms, balanced with the needs of the larger group, is a tightrope humans walk everyday. Parents get a ringside view as children embark on the journey. The job of parents is to help children handle freedom while at the same time teaching them to abide by basic social rules. It can be pretty intimidating.

Children sometimes resist rules as a way of searching out their personal identity. It’s easiest to rebel against those who are closest to you; this makes parents and caregivers handy prey. (Ask any adolescent!) We can’t demand children always agree with us. If we did, how could they think of themselves as autonomous individuals? But we can require children to abide by reasonable rules that are intended to ensure and promote their well-being.

Challenging authority is normal, even healthy. But too much rebellion is stressful for parent and child alike. It can be a sign of problems related to children’s emotional or social development. It can reflect a poor parent-child relationship. It can indicate children are feeling confused, anxious, or insecure. Children may feel they are getting so little attention that they act badly to get you involved. When children continuously second guess you and engage in testing behavior, it’s a sign that you need to be a more predictable, clear, and firm parent.

We all know basic rules are good for children. They provide stability, structure, and security. But remember, children don’t need robots or computers for parents;

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they need responsive, caring, thinking adults. There are times when being flexible with rules is reasonable and wise. But if you find yourself always giving in, you've turned your parenting power over to your children. It's a power they're not ready to handle.

If your child challenges you excessively, be on the safe side and seek help from family members or child care professionals who are knowledgeable and compassionate. The following may be helpful, too. They are tips for communicating rules to children in a firm, respectful manner.

- Establish rules that are understandable and age appropriate.
- Maintain self control when stating rules. Yelling, turning red in the face, and tightening the jaw simply tells children they have taken emotional control over you.
- Address behavior in a calm, direct, and matter-of-fact voice. It should not be a singsong sweet voice or a high-pitched shrill. Use a slightly lower voice than you use in daily conversation. This is a signal that you are serious and expect compliance.
- Bend to child's level and make eye contact. State your expectations clearly and simply. Phrase them positively. "You may put the toy on the shelf now."
- Tell children what consequence will occur if they don't change their behavior. "You won't be able to watch television until your toys are picked up."
- Enforce a consequence immediately if your child disobeys. Say what you mean and mean what you say.
- Enforce consequences consistently regardless of your mood or energy level.
- Never phrase an expectation as a question. For instance, "It's time to go take a bath now, okay?" The "okay?" infers the child has a choice. It's hard to break the "okay" habit! If you must say something, say "Do you understand?"
- Call children on their game when they try to distract you. For instance, after being told to put away toys your child may grumble, "I hate you!" The child is trying to push your emotional button. Don't give in to it! I've seen parents respond by groveling to children in a syrupy, sing-song voice, "Well I love you, honey bunch." Then they pick up toys for the child! Instead, respond unemotionally by saying, "That is not the issue. I expect the toys to be picked up when I come back."
- Occasionally make regular conflicts less personalized by creatively motivating compliance. For instance: "I'm setting this timer to 5 minutes. See if you can pick up your toys before it rings." Preschool teachers signal clean up time by singing the same song everyday. Give it a try; it can work at home, too.
- Include children in making rules. When you do, they are much more likely to comply with them. For instance, ask, "How can we prevent people from tripping at night when they go to the bathroom?" Since children are usually the ones getting up, they will see that the rule about putting toys away is for everyone's safety.
- When you make a decision, don't continue haggling. Inevitably you will be rebuked with a "That's not fair!" Here's your response: "I understand you don't feel it's fair, but I've made my decision." Of course, high spirited children will rebound back with, "Why do YOU get to make the decision?" The answer is simple: "Because I'm the parent."
- If all else fails, cross your fingers and carry a four-leaf clover. But by all means, hang in there! A better day is bound to be just around the corner . . .

Parenting Resource

Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a lifetime by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.