

ESTABLISHING A POSITIVE FAMILY STRUCTURE

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As the school year begins, we may find that our children are a little out-of-sorts. Typical daily activities such as transitions to and from school, family meals, and chores or homework may be challenging. If so, it may be helpful to revisit our “family plans.” A family plan should include strategies to clarify expectations, establish structure and routines, and promote cooperation and responsibility. Before describing each of these components, it is important to remember that every family is unique. Strategies must be tailored to our goals, needs and preferences, and situations that we encounter. Family plans based on these considerations can prevent problems, teach our children better ways to meet their needs, and improve overall family functioning.

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Clarifying Expectations

Oftentimes we assume that children know what we expect of them, only to find out that we have been vague or inconsistent, and possibly even modeled behaviors that contradict what we want. Family lives can be improved by clarifying expectations – or, more specifically, determining how we want to function in our families and spelling out rules to guide behavior. Rules vary from family to family, but examples include positive statements such as: “gentle hands”, and “Pick up and put away your toys”. We may also have specific expectations for particular situations such as remaining in your seat until you are finished with meals or completing particular chores each day (e.g., facilitated by posting a list on the refrigerator). Our rules must pertain to everyone in the family and must be made explicit (e.g., by writing them down and posting them). To firmly establish our expectations, we can review them regularly and encourage our children to follow them using reminders, and correction when necessary.

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Organizing Space and Time

Once we have clarified our expectations, we can reorganize our household to help family members achieve them. Organizing space and time involves asking the question: “In what ways do our environment and routines support or interfere with the behavior we want?”

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It may be helpful to consider things like whether our surroundings make it easier for everyone to complete their daily activities efficiently and whether room arrangements allow for adequate supervision. Examples of organizing space include finding storage for shoes and backpacks near the door, arranging a homework station with all the necessary supplies, and keeping all toys and electronic devices out of bedrooms at night.

Regarding routines, we should consider our overall schedules (e.g., Do we have too many/too few activities? Does everyone know what they are doing and when?) as well as specific routines (What are the steps children

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should follow when getting ready for school in the morning?). Many families keep a weekly schedule posted which includes all extracurricular activities, appointments, and major outings. Our schedules should be updated regularly, available and understandable to all family members, and adequately balanced to meet everyone’s needs. In addition to general schedule planning, it may also be helpful to redefine routines for typical daily activities (i.e., when and exactly how each should be accomplished). Examples may include following the same steps to get ready each morning and having a list of items needed by the door, defining responsibilities and a timeline for meal preparation (e.g., set table, pour drinks, put food out), and creating a bath schedule, wind-down routine, and lights-out time at night.

Responding Consistently

In order to firmly establish the household structures in these previous sections, we must respond to behavior consistently. Responding consistently means that we provide more attention, privileges, and other rewards for positive behavior (e.g., following house rules and routines) than for problem behavior. It also means that we don’t let our kids off the hook or give in to misbehavior. For example, we might encourage our children to try to do things on their own and ask nicely for assistance by providing attention and help and not provide these consequences when they whine, demand, or argue. We might also offer special rewards for good behavior during particularly challenging times. Examples include: driving children to school (versus having them walk, bike, or ride the bus) every Friday if they were ready on time Monday through Thursday; allowing friends over after chores or homework have been completed; and providing desserts only when the kids finish their meals and demonstrate good manners.

Careful and ongoing attention to our expectations, organization of space and time, and how we respond to behavior can make family life more positive and productive. We should view our family plans as dynamic, re-evaluating each component frequently and changing strategies as our needs and situations evolve. Working together to resolve any problems will enhance ownership in the plan and result in lasting improvements.

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