

Setting Limits: How to Help the Child Who Won't Follow Rules

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By Polly Greenberg

“That’s Not *My* Rule!”

How to work with children who won't follow rules

Dear Polly, Six children in my kindergarten class ignore rules. They talk and play no matter what I'm doing with the group or while I'm in the corridor. I tell them the rules repeatedly. They just won't seem to follow them. What can I do?

Allow Lots of Talk Time

This would frustrate any teacher, but luckily there's lots you can do. Begin by rethinking your schedule to make sure you have enough casual time when quiet conversation is welcome. The fact that so many of your children aren't doing as you ask suggests that too much non-talking and non-playing is being expected of children their age. Young children need time to reconnect soon after entering the classroom. Many teachers warmly greet each child by name, give them a personal comment and invite him/her to find a book and a friend to share it with on the rug. This simple act accomplishes five things:

- re-establishes the individual's positive relationship with you.
- gives the child a destination and focus.
- provides an opportunity for kids to reconnect with classmates.
- ensures a pleasant literacy experience. (If you have an aide or student teacher, he or she can assist children in getting an interesting book and settling down. Otherwise, this is a perfect task for volunteer parents)
- allows you to spend five or ten minutes with the most difficult child. Do something de-stressing with her such as letting her lead at the sand, water, or play dough table, or even dance to a lively cassette in a corner of the room. Time spent trying to meet the needs of children whose behavior is unusually challenging is time well spent; all the children will benefit.

Increase Small Group Activities

Alternate between large and small group activities. Total class seated activities, such as opening routines, lessons, sharing time, and even small group lessons, should be short, purposeful, and lively. For sit-and-listen teacher-directed activities, fifteen-minute chunks are better than forty-five minute blocks. If necessary, you can have three shorter sessions sprinkled throughout the day. The more pressured children feel, the more grim they get

and the more “behavior problems” they have. Skilled teachers seat sociable children near themselves or an assistant. Children who continuously disrupt are removed from the group, not with glares, threats, and deprivations, but with fun, turns, and important roles. Whenever appropriate, skilled teachers work with small groups, where most children function better and learn more. If you have an assistant, very little needs be done with the whole class at once.

Reconsider Your Pacing

Alternate quiet and active activities. Follow seated, teacher-directed sessions with music and movement, or at least a hike to a different classroom and a change of pace (library, computer, art). Even center time involves more moving and less teacher direction than seated sessions. Some children need an adult to work with them at center time so they stay task-oriented. Most children need twenty minutes or more to get into, and finish, a task. Give children enough time to complete a task, and plan what to do next with those who finish quickly.

Schedule Additional Free Time

At some point each day, offer children chances to choose freely what they will do and with whom. Specifically, have half-an-hour or more of free play outside, forty-five minutes of free play in the classroom (so children can become involved in what they’re doing and resolve social problems that crop up) as well as a variety of small choices for children to make during the day. Children are more willing to cooperate with adults if they feel their needs and wishes are respected and they are spoken to kindly (even when firmly).

Reduce Transition Times

Keep transitions to a minimum. Plan and prepare so you can slide directly from one activity to the next without milling around time. Move children a few at a time, and keep everyone busy during this unstructured time. Adults can partner with “all-over-the-place” children.

Reevaluate Classroom Rules

Rethink your rules and make sure each rule is really essential. If necessary, facilitate small group discussions in which children think through the rule’s benefits, then enforce it. (The idea that children shouldn’t chat quietly as they move through school hallways seems quaintly old-fashioned and has been abandoned by many schools. Your staff may want to rethink this “talking in the halls” policy.)

Partner with Parents

Team with parents and talk with the child who is having difficulty, emphasizing his/her strengths and enlisting his/her cooperation in following what’s needed for the class to work well for everybody.

Seek Help When Needed

If you have a child with exceptionally challenging behavior, check books and the web for tips on preventing unwanted behavior and the handling of incidents. Otherwise, seek advice from the school counselor.

Above all, work on your relationship with your nonconformists. Look for their great traits and appreciate their valuable attributes. For example, you might make special note of how they enjoy other people and seek friendships. When these qualities are needed, find opportunities to put these children to work in ways that will help you and/or other children.