

## Making Expectations Clear

It is necessary to be very clear about our expectations and consequences (step one of Enforcing Consequences). Otherwise, we end up being wishy-washy, which sets up ongoing battles with our children. Here is an example of a mother who decides to do a better job of clarifying and enforcing expectations.

Playing Xbox has become a problem for thirteen-year-old Michael and eleven-year-old Sam. They stay on way too long and then pitch a fit when Mom finally coaxes them off. So she took some time to clarify her expectations:

- You can play Xbox two nights a week, Tuesday and Thursday, plus Saturday.
- You must complete daily homework and chores before you can play.
- You must set a timer for forty-five minutes on weeknights and ninety minutes on Saturdays.
- Get off immediately and without a fuss when time is up.

Mom also took some time to think through consequences for failure to comply with these expectations. She came up with the consequence that her boys would not be able to use the Xbox at the next scheduled time. And they'd lose the privilege for a week if they had two incidents during a single week.

She then had a meeting with her boys to communicate her expectations and consequences. She first stated the expectations and then asked her boys to repeat them back so she knew they were clear. It went like this:

Mom: "I've been thinking about your use of the Xbox. It has been causing a real problem lately because you guys have had a hard time getting off and then spend the rest of the night being grumpy and uncooperative. Xbox is a privilege and I want to share what I expect in order for you to continue using it." She then explained the four expectations outlined above and asked, "Michael, what are my expectations for you to use the Xbox?"

Michael: "These are silly rules, Mom. I don't know why I can't spend more time if I've got my homework and chores done. Most kids spend as much time as they like. Their parents aren't as mean as you and Dad."

Mom ignores the negative comments and persists: "Nevertheless, what are our expectations?"

Michael: "Mom, this is dumb."

Mom: "Dumb or not, we're only going to let you use the Xbox if you follow our rules. Otherwise, the Xbox goes away. What are our expectations?"

Michael: "I can't believe how stupid this is. Okay, I have to do my homework and chores before I can play."

Mom: "Very good. You were listening to me. What else?"

Michael: "Oh brother. I hate this. We only get forty-five minutes on weeknights and ninety minutes on Saturdays."

Mom: "Great. Which weekdays can you play?"

Michael, with resentment in his voice: "Tuesdays and Thursdays. You think I'm stupid, Mom?"

Mom: "No. I just want to make sure we are clear. What else do I expect?"

Michael: "I have to get off immediately. But, Mom, that is a really hard rule. If I'm in the middle of a level, I can't just get off; I have to finish."

Mom: "What is the rule?"

Michael: "You don't understand, Mom. You haven't played. You don't know what it's like."

Mom: "What is the rule?"

Michael: "I have to get off immediately."

Mom: "That is exactly right. Very good, Michael."

Notice that Mom did not get sidetracked into arguing with Michael. She ignored his drama and persisted with her agenda, reinforcing him when he stated what she wanted to hear. We have to expect that our children will complain about some of our expectations and try to manipulate us into backing down (a natural part of growing up). They do this through anger, pleading, pouting, or anything that will "hook" us into giving in. But we must trust our authority and continue to be clear and firm.

Let's continue.

Mom: "Okay, guys. There is a consequence if you don't follow these four rules. You lose the privilege of using Xbox the next time it's scheduled. If you fail to follow the rules two times within a week, then you will miss Xbox for a full week." Turning to her other son, "So, Sam, what will happen if you don't comply with these expectations?"

Sam: "You already told us, Mom."

Mom: "I want to make sure you understand. What will happen?"

Sam: "Mom, I know what will happen. I don't have to repeat it. You just told us."

Mom: "True, I just told you. What will happen if you don't comply with these expectations?"

Sam: "Mom. You're treating me like a three-year-old."

Mom: "Nevertheless, what will happen?"

Sam: "We'll miss our turn the next time."

Mom: "Exactly. And what if we have a problem on two occasions?"

Sam: "We'll not get to use it for a week."

Mom: "Very good, Sam. I appreciate you repeating this to me so we have a clear understanding. Thanks, guys."

Again, Mom ignores the push-back. Her boys are expressing frustration and disappointment and also testing to see if she'll back down. If she gets hooked, she'll end up in an unproductive power struggle and lose her ability to enforce consequences. By sticking to her guns, she controls what she can, family structure, and allows her sons to take responsibility for their own feelings and behavior. They'll handle not getting what they want, and learn to tolerate frustration and take responsibility for their emotions in the process.

It is true that Mom is taking a pretty hard line here, because this behavior has been a problem and she has not done a good job of clarifying expectations and enforcing her boundaries in the past. Enforcing boundaries in such a way is a "tough-love" skill. And yet, we can simultaneously establish order in our homes through enforcing consequences *and* use other skills to build a nurturing climate and positive relationships.

I don't necessarily recommend using this method to establish clear expectations in all areas of family life at once. Pick an area that has been a problem and communicate your expectations and consequences in this area. Expand from there, once you have some confidence in your use of this skill.

As stated earlier, consequences work best when imposed at a young age. As our children become teenagers, they need more latitude. We shift from imposing consequences to talking, even negotiating agreements, most importantly around issues of moral agency (the choices they make about how to live their lives). Of course, we still have boundaries or non-negotiables around behaviors that affect all family members—chores, language, and respectful behavior. But teenagers are learning to think for themselves and need room to make their own decisions.

Notice how we use limits and consequences not only to teach our children responsibility but also as a way of taking care of our own needs. Many expectations and limits are designed to help us parents meet our needs for a happy and peaceful life.