

Chapter 6

Establishing Rules for Your Child



Adolescents drink less and have fewer alcohol-related problems when their parents discipline them consistently and set clear expectations about drinking.

-L. Strunin and R. Hingson

What I'm about to tell you may be the twelve most important words written in this book. *Your child wants and needs to understand the rules of their world.*

Please, repeat that again:

Your child wants and needs to understand the rules of their world.

Do you understand the significance about the importance of rules in your child's life? Do you understand that your child needs rules? Rules enable your child to know:

- How to behave acceptably.
- What is expected of them.
- Who is in control.
- Where your child stands with others.
- How far your child can go.
- What happens when your child goes too far.

As important as rules are to the growth and development of your child, your child is not born with an inherent understanding of what your rules for acceptable behavior are in general and alcohol and other drugs in particular. In order for your child to know what your rules are about alcohol and other drugs, it's your job to teach them.

Take a moment and think about the following questions.

Bridge Builder's Exercise

- 1) What role do rules about a child's consumption of

alcohol and other drugs play in influencing whether or not your child will choose to consume alcohol and other drugs?

- 2) How would your child's decision whether or not to consume alcohol and other drugs be influenced by NOT having rules about underage children consuming alcohol and other drugs?
- 3) How would your child's decision whether or not to consume alcohol and other drugs be influenced by you NOT expressing to your child rules about underage children consuming alcohol and other drugs?
- 4) How would your child's decision whether or not to consume alcohol and other drugs be influenced by having and expressing to your child rules about underage children consuming alcohol and other drugs?

As a parent, you're responsible for setting rules for your child to follow. When it comes to alcohol and other drugs, strong rules need to be established to protect your child's well-being. Use the following exercise as a means by which you can formulate your family's rules about underage family members consuming alcohol and other drugs.

Bridge Builder's Exercise

- 1) What are your rules about a child consuming alcohol and other drugs?
- 2) Have you communicated those rules to your child?
- 3) Have you thought about how you intend to enforce those rules?

- 4) Have you clearly communicated to your children the consequences that will be implemented if those rules are broken?

Setting rules is only half the job. You must also be prepared to enforce the consequence when the rules are broken. Using consequences takes both wisdom and courage. The objective of a consequence is to allow children to see how their choices affect their lives rather than to be used as punishment.

Consequences are different from punishment. Punishment hurts children. It makes them angry. On the other hand, consequences teach children. They show your child that when she does certain things, certain things will happen.

Consequences provide clear and definite answers to children's questions about what is and is not acceptable. Consequences are the ultimate teacher of responsibility by holding your child accountable for their actions.

Enforcing consequences is critical to rule making. When you make rules that you don't enforce, your child may get the idea that you're not serious about rules. To apply consequences in an effective manner you should:

- Apply the consequence *immediately*.
- Apply the consequence *consistently* from one occasion to the next.
- Apply the consequence *consistently* so that all care-takers of your child respond in a similar manner to a similar situation.
- Apply the consequence *consistently* so that what your child was told would occur as a result of their misbehavior does occur.

- Apply the consequence so that there is a clearly defined *time limit* of short-duration.

Think of the rules you have about your child consuming alcohol and other drugs. Can you think of an appropriate consequence that will teach her the importance of following the rules? Are the consequences you have chosen a reasonable result of her choices? Do the consequences allow you to avoid nagging and punishing?

Bridge Builder's Checklist

Steps for setting and enforcing the family rules about underage children consuming alcohol and other drugs.

- 1) **Be precise.**
 - a) Specifically and clearly articulate what the rules about alcohol and other drugs are.
 - b) Explain the reasons for the rules.
 - c) Explain to your child how they'll benefit from following the rules.
 - d) Tell your child what specific behavior(s) is expected.
 - e) Tell your child the consequences of breaking the rules.
 - f) Tell your child how the consequences will be administered.
 - g) Tell your child how much time will be involved with the lifespan of the consequences.
 - h) Tell your child what the enforcement of the consequence is supposed to achieve.
- 2) **Be committed and consistent.** Children test limits, look for the crack in the plan, and study how

they can get around the rules being set for them. You need to be consistent in your application of your family's alcohol and other drugs rules as they apply to situations, settings, and with whom your child is spending time.

- 3) **Be levelheaded.** When the time comes to apply the consequences to your child breaking a rule, you'll likely be angry or disappointed at the time. Don't use your emotions against your child. This is a time to be evenhanded in dealing with your child. Don't pile on by grounding your child forever. Don't use intimidation tactics such as threatening your child. Be calm. Be fair. Carry out the exact consequences that you've previously discussed with your child.

For more information about rules and consequences, be sure to read my book, *Ask Dr. Steve . . . How Can I Set Limits for My Children?*

