

# Southeastern PA School Age Child Care Project



## Helping Kids Live By the Rules in After-School Programs by Roberta L. Newman

Adapted and excerpted from *Training New After-School Staff: Welcome to the World of School-Age Care!* New Albany, OH: School-Age NOTES, 2002 By Roberta L. Newman.

### The Importance of Involving Children in Rule-Making

As school-age children grow and change and interact with each other in school-age programs, they need to know what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior. To set a tone for expected behavior, many organizations establish a code of conduct that is communicated to children as soon as they enroll in the program. However, when rules are made solely by adults without children's input, it's not uncommon to hear staff say things like: "I've told my kids the rules over and over again; why don't they follow them?" OR "These kids know the rules; they just ignore them!" Most quality school-age programs recognize that pre-established behavior standards and guidelines are only a starting point. They know that children and youth are much more likely to buy-in and live by rules and limits if they have a chance to shape them. With this in mind, quality programs get children involved in the rule-making process through rule-making sessions.

### Conducting Successful Rule-Making Sessions

Gather your group for a rule-making session. Have a chart pad and marker handy to record children's ideas. Begin by asking children why they think rules are needed and how they think rules could help everyone have great experiences in the program. Invite children to make a list of the different things they think it would be important to have rules about. As children share their



ideas, record them on chart paper. It's likely that children will identify many of the same topics you and your program think are important. They will probably suggest the kinds of things listed below. If children need help getting started, suggest one or more items from the list.

### Examples of Things to Have Rules About

- staying safe
- staying healthy
- treating each other with fairness, kindness, and respect
- getting along with each other
- respecting people's privacy
- sharing games and equipment
- respecting and protecting personal property
- respecting and protecting program materials, equipment, and facilities

When children have listed all their ideas, add any other topics you think should be included based on what you know about school-age children and about your organization. Talk about each topic to be sure everyone agrees it's important. If your list is long, combine related topics. This will help you avoid creating too many rules which can be confusing and hard to remember. Then, involve children in a rule-making session, using the following guidelines.

- **Look at each topic you identified and come up with a rule or guidelines which could support the topic.** For example, a rule related to *respecting people's privacy* might be: "Keep your hands to yourself." A rule about *getting along with each other* might be "If you have a problem, talk it out."

December 2009

Breakthrough to Quality .....  
A series of articles and training resources from a national leader in out-of-school time.

by Roberta L. Newman

Article 3: Helping Kids Live by the Rules in After-School Programs

A rule about *staying safe* might be: **Always wear goggles at the woodworking bench.**

- **State rules clearly and simply.** For example: **Wash your hands before eating and after using the bathroom.**
- **State rules positively.** For example: **Walking is the speed limit indoors,** instead of **No running.** Use polite words, instead of **No swearing.** Stating rules positively helps children focus their attention on what it means to DO THE RIGHT THING. Positive rule statements are helpful to children because they prescribe a course of action. While negatively stated rules do let children know what's prohibited, they don't help children to learn what behavior IS acceptable, desirable, or expected.
- **Create only as many rules as you need to have the program run smoothly; try to generalize and establish a few basic guidelines which apply throughout the program.** For example: **Put things away when you're finished using them.** Use equipment properly; ask for help if you don't know how.
- **Establish specialized rules for specific program areas if needed.** For example, the following rules may be very helpful in helping children DO THE RIGHT THING while using the *Board and Table Game Area*:

**Return game pieces to the right box.** **Return games to the shelf when you're finished.** **Play by the rules.** **Ask permission before you join a game in progress.**

### Helping Children Take Responsibility for Their Actions

Involving children and youth in establishing rules and limits is the first step in getting them to buy-in and live by the rules. But it's important not to stop there. In order for program rules and limits to have *credibility*, children need to know what will happen if the rules are broken; they need to know the rules will be applied consistently and fairly, and *what the consequences will be if rules are broken*. Again, children are more likely to live by the rules and take responsibility for their actions if they participate in deciding what happens when rules aren't followed. Get children involved in this process by having them brainstorm some ideas about what should happen if the rules they helped shape aren't followed.

As you talk with children, keep in mind these two types of consequences: **Natural Consequences** and **Logical Consequences**.

**Natural consequences** happen as a direct result of an action. Here are some examples of **natural consequences**:

Natural Consequences	
Rule	Examples of Natural Consequence of breaking that rule
Keep Your Arms Inside the Bus	The child may suffer an injury as a natural consequence of putting his/her arm outside the bus window.
Use Kind Words	If the child regularly breaks that rule, the child may lose friends as a natural consequence of mean-spirited teasing or taunting.
Stay on the Sidewalk	The child may be hit by a car as a natural consequence of running out into the street.
Wash Hands Before Eating	The child may get sick as a natural consequence.

As you can see, **natural consequences** can be disastrous for children if they are allowed to play out to their conclusion. As a staff member, it's important to anticipate any **dangerous natural consequences** which could occur if children break the rules, set up systems which make it easy for children to follow the rules, and take steps to intervene and guide children **before rules are broken**. This is especially important when children's safety and well-being are at stake. No child should have to lose an arm in order to learn the importance of keeping his or her arms inside the bus windows!

**Logical consequences** can be used very effectively to help children learn to accept responsibility for their actions. Staff can work with children in advance to decide on **fair, effective logical consequences** related to breaking rules. Here are some important things to keep in mind when deciding on appropriate **logical consequences**.

Logical Consequences	
Logical consequences are always directly related to what the rule is about.	It would not be a <b>logical consequence</b> to tell a child who has been throwing sand at other children that he/she may not be in the Magic Club tomorrow. Sand throwing and participation in the Magic Club are not logically connected.
It's important to use appropriate rule reminders when applying logical consequences.	For example: You and the children might decide that if someone breaks the rule: "Put things away when you're finished using them," the <b>logical consequence</b> will be: "You will lose the privilege of using the materials you don't put away". However, if a child who usually picks up after himself forgets to put away the Checkers game once, it would probably not be logical to ban the child from playing Checkers for the rest of the week. It would be best to give the child a <b>rule reminder</b> before imposing a consequence. On the other hand, if a child continually ignores the rules about putting games away <b>after being reminded of the rule</b> , it would be logical to tell the child he/she may not use the board games for the remainder of the afternoon, or perhaps for the next day if it's late in the afternoon.
Action	<b>Immediate short-term, logical consequences</b> are usually the most effective way to encourage children to take responsibility for their actions.

It takes good judgment and a balanced view to make rules come to life in your program. Here are some examples of how staff can help children take responsibility for their actions through **effective use of rule reminders, positive guidance, logical consequences, and follow-through** in different circumstances:

If children break the rule "Treat program materials with respect" by throwing clay at the wall in the art area, **remind them of the rule and what they are allowed to do with clay**. Before continuing their play, have them work together to clean up the mess. Tell them they may continue to use the clay ONLY if they use it properly. If they begin to throw clay again, an **effective, immediate, short-term logical consequence** would be to tell the children they may not use the clay for the rest of the day.

If a child breaks the rule "Be a good sport and always play safe" by throwing a baseball bat in the air when he/she strikes out, **take action immediately**. Stay calm; move the child away from the group. Encourage him/her to "cool off" for a few minutes. Then, **remind the child of the rule to "be a good sport and always play safe."** Give the child the following message: "I cannot allow you to throw your bat because someone could get hurt." If this is the first time the child has exhibited this behavior, a **short-term logical consequence** would be to have the child sit out for one or two bat turns until he/she regains self-control. When he/she re-enters the game, give another **rule reminder to "be a good sport and always play safe."** If the child continues to have trouble living by the rule to "Be a good sport and always play safe," you may need to talk with the child's parent, your co-workers, and/or your supervisor about what else you need to do to help the child comply with the rule and keep everyone safe and happy.

If a child breaks the rule "Use polite words to talk through problems" by swearing or calling names at another child who wants to wear the same dress-up clothes, **remind the child of the rule**. Stress that everyone agreed to use polite language in the program. Give the child the following message: "I cannot allow you to swear at others (or call them names)." If the child continues to use inappropriate language, an **effective short-term logical consequence** would be to tell the child he/she must leave the dramatic play area for the afternoon and redirect the child to another area. Continue to monitor the child's behavior and language in the new area, using **rule reminders** and **short-term logical consequences** as needed. If the child continues a pattern of breaking the rule "Use polite words to talk through problems," talk with the child's parents, your co-workers, and/or your supervisor to develop a plan for helping the child take responsibility for his/her words and observe the rule for using polite language. If other children also have trouble observing the rule, it may be time to gather everyone together to talk about the problem and how children can help each other remember to use polite language.

## Final Tips for Helping Children Buy-In to Program Rules and Accept Responsibility for Their Actions

Creating rules and guidelines provides the foundation for a safe, happy environment where everyone can have a positive program experience. Listed below are some important things staff can do to create a positive program environment that helps children live by program rules and accept responsibility for their actions when rules and limits are broken or ignored.

- Involve children in setting program rules and limits. Have a **get started** rule-making session, using the techniques presented in this article.
- Involve children in making posters which list program rules and limits. Display posters in visible places in your program.
- Give children positive reminders about rules and limits. Talk with your co-workers about how many reminders or warnings you want to give before imposing a consequence. Remember that consequences for breaking safety rules may need to be imposed more quickly than consequences for failing to use quiet voices or forgetting to put things away.
- Use positive guidance techniques to help children follow rules and limits. For example:
  - ◇ Redirect children to another activity or another area if they are having trouble following the rules.
  - ◇ Make it easy for children to follow the rules. For example, if you want children to take good care of equipment and supplies, be sure items are in good condition to begin with, provide adequate storage, display items neatly and attractively, and use effective techniques for helping children make smooth transitions from one area or activity to the next.
  - ◇ Remove objects or equipment which children are not allowed to use.
  - ◇ Teach children how to use equipment properly.
  - ◇ Be sure children understand your program schedule and routines.
  - ◇ Stay close to children who may have a hard time remembering the rules or controlling their tempers.
- ◇ Help children pace themselves. For example, if children are becoming overly tired, anxious, or frustrated during an activity encourage them to take a break or try something else for awhile.
- Anticipate problems before they occur. Give **rule reminders** and remind children of **consequences** if rules are broken.
- When giving **rule reminders**, be sure to get children's attention and maintain eye contact. Use a tone that is firm, but polite.
- Refrain from using harsh punishments as consequences when children break the rules.
 

For example:

  - ◇ NEVER withhold food as a consequence for breaking a rule.
  - ◇ NEVER deny a child the right to tend to personal needs (going to the bathroom, getting a drink of water) as a consequence for breaking a rule.
  - ◇ NEVER belittle, ridicule, humiliate, or scream at children as a consequence for breaking a rule. Use a firm voice when needed, but CONTROL YOUR OWN ANGER. Comment on what the child has done . not on who the child is. For example: DON'T say: "You're really a jerk for shoving Matthew." DO use a firm, respectful tone or voice and say: "I can't allow you to shove others in the program."
- Remember to keep in mind individual differences among children. For example: children who are impulsive, intense, or highly distractible may need more help, monitoring, rule reminders, and consistent support to abide by the rules.
- Apply effective logical consequences when rules are broken or ignored.
- Be consistent and fair in your application of logical consequences. Don't play favorites.
- Remember that rules may need to be changed, added, or dropped as children grow and change. Meet frequently with children to **rule review** sessions. Get rid of any rules you no longer need. Add others as needed.

Copyright © 2008 by Roberta L. Newman. Authorized Purchaser of these articles may reproduce the articles for use in the Purchaser's program, organization, or agency newsletter. Authorized Purchaser may also reproduce the articles as handouts for training sessions or conferences provided by the Purchaser's organization or agency. All other uses are prohibited. No part of these articles may be altered without written permission from the author. Publishing Rights are not transferable.

Roberta Newman is an experienced after-school professional and nationally recognized speaker, trainer, and author of books and videos on after-school care and related topics. For more information, visit Roberta's Web site at [Newroads-Consulting.com](http://Newroads-Consulting.com) or contact Roberta at 757-331-

Southeastern Pennsylvania  
School Age Child Care Project  
201 Sabine Avenue  
Narberth, PA 19072

Phone: 610-617-4550 option 4  
Fax: 610-617-3550  
E-mail: [sepasacc@melc.org](mailto:sepasacc@melc.org)  
[www.sepasacc.org](http://www.sepasacc.org)



A division of

**TRAINING RESOURCE: TAKING THE NEXT STEPS****Questions to Think and Talk About**

1. If your program had a one-sentence code of conduct, what would it say?
2. What is it important to have rules about in your program?
3. What special rules might be needed for specific areas in your program?
4. What problems, if any, occur in your program because of an absence of rules, guidelines, or clear expectations? What problems occur because rules or guidelines are confusing, vague, overwhelming, complicated, unrealistic, or negative in tone?
5. What natural consequences occur when a child breaks a rule in your program? Are any of these natural consequences potentially dangerous? If so, what can be done to prevent or eliminate these natural consequences?

**Learning Activities**

1. Identify five situations in your program where logical consequences could be used effectively to help children take responsibility for their actions.
2. Develop a plan for conducting a rule-making session with children in your program. Be sure your plan includes strategies for helping children live by the rules they create.
3. Identify areas of your program where it would be helpful to post rule-reminders for children. Create a slogan or phrase that could be posted prominently in each of these areas.