

## *Why Follow the Rules?*

**A**RE RULES MEANT to be broken? Regulations and guidelines can certainly seem inconvenient, and we can witness flagrant disregard for them without looking far. The 2010 Academy Award-winning documentary *Inside Job*, an analysis of the recession, reveals the moral uncertainty professionals can experience when their colleagues rationalize throwing rules to the prevailing winds. Children need to learn that abiding by rules benefits everyone and gives rise to good feeling. A study by Kristin H. Languttata, Ph.D. at UC Davis shows children over the age of four ascribe positive feelings to following rules when they have learned that others find satisfaction in “doing the right thing.”

Adults need to establish the habit of following rules, according to this study, by talking about the rewards they experience through following regulations and laws. The UC Davis study also shows that children are more apt to choose conformity to rules when they remember the guidelines themselves rather than getting reminders. Teachers also know that children buy into rules more readily when they have helped establish or agree with the reasoning behind them.

It’s easy to say that children “should be taught to go by the rules.” However, reflecting on our own tendencies to skirt around guidelines when it’s convenient is more complicated. A friend told me recently that as a teen she lied to her mother constantly because she heard her mother lying to her friends about social engagements—so she thought lack of honesty was the norm.

Our rationalizations for rule breaking make sense because they are based on maintaining our own well-being in the moment: “I have to park in this spot because I’m in such a hurry,” “I have to speed or we won’t get there on time.” Yet we want to raise children with the courage to ask themselves if their actions are for the greater good. For example, it can feel fun to run in the school hallways, even though it’s against the rules.

But what would the school be like if when the bell rang, every classroom released a jostling crowd of runners like a crowd of impatient shoppers running full force when the doors finally open? It’s our job to explain that rules may not always suit our individual desires, but they are necessary to create environments in which everyone can feel safe and flourish.

That doesn’t mean we need to make rules to cover every situation. The best guidelines express the thinking and feeling that a rule is based on, such as “Speak kindly and respectfully to others,” “Take care of classroom materials.” Rules give children a sense of security and belonging. When we talk about the reasons behind them plus the responsible feeling we get by following them, we teach children to gradually learn the hard work of putting aside self-interest and reaping the rewards of their blossoming highest knowing.

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