



# Empower Autism

## Rules and Rewards

Many children (with and without autism) really like rules. Rules can clarify expectations in a certain environment, and this can reduce anxiety for kids on the spectrum. As an adult who is sharing a home with a child, you can and should have some household rules. If you can state the rules clearly, and maintain them consistently, most children will learn to follow basic rules.

### A Good Rule:

- Is stated in the positive (it says what you *should* do, not what you can't do—'Walk' instead of 'No running')
- Is clearly defined (you have practiced walking and running, using those words, and you are reasonably sure your child knows what both words mean)
- Is posted in the place where it applies (just saying a rule over and over is not good enough—post it up on the wall, and you will save yourself some frustration, and your child will get an extra dose of reminders)
- Is part of a small set of new rules. If you are trying to teach or clarify rules, don't prioritize more than two at a time. Once those two are automatic, you can move on to new things

### Rewards

Rewards are really fun. They keep our focus on something positive, and they keep the power of choice with the child. Attaching a specific reward to following a specific rule can make it a whole lot easier for a child to follow that rule. There are several things to keep in mind when you choose a reward. How often will you give it? Younger kids, and kids who are new to earning things need immediate rewards. Older kids, or kids who have used reward charts and token economies can wait a little longer for their payoff. Here are some tips for choosing and using rewards:

- For immediate rewards, use something very small that you can give every time they follow the rule. If your reward is an entire snickers bar for saying kind things, your child might feel sick very quickly 😊
- Make the reward something that isn't drama for you. It should be something that is easy to access for you, fairly cheap, that you can keep within easy reach in the house
- Be ready to change your reward frequently. It is more motivating to work for a new and exciting reward, than the same old one you've been getting every day
- Make a big list of things that your child enjoys, so that you don't have to think up something new on the spot.

### Teaching Rules

For most kids with autism, the rules have to be taught step-by-step. Just saying a rule, or expecting that a child will figure out an unspoken rule doesn't usually work. Here are some basic steps to teaching a rule.

1. Get paper and pen
2. Decide on the rule (keeping in mind that you can only teach one a time—so prioritize the ones that matter the most, or are daily struggles)
3. Write the rule down for yourself. Phrase it positively (state exactly what you want your child to DO), and make it no longer than about 6 words.: “Put backpack in bedroom everyday” is better than “when you get home from school, you always have to go ahead and put your back in your room”.
4. Decide whether your child really know what all the words mean in your rule
5. Decide if you are going to reward your child for following this rule (you can reward them at first, and fade the reward once the behavior is automatic—this is recommended)
6. Decide what reward you want to use
7. Write down your system (If Johnny puts his backpack in his room, he gets to watch TV for 30 minutes. If he doesn't put the backpack in his room, he can't watch TV)
8. Make a reward chart if you're going to use one (see our 'managing behavior worksheet for more info)
9. Decide how you will explain the rule to your child. Suggested method: write it down, or draw a picture of your system. Explain the new system before it's time to use it.
10. Choose the day and time that you will begin the new rule and rule system. Tell your child when this will be and put it on the calendar
11. Post the rule where your child can see it when they need to follow it. Put a picture of the reward on the sign too.
12. On the big day, walk your child through the exact steps you want them to take, and then give them the reward. This is to help them understand and buy into the new system.
13. Keep walking them through the steps of the rule and giving them the reward until you're sure they know what to do and when to do it
14. When you're ready for your child to follow the rule without help, get their attention, and point to where you posted the rule.
15. When you want to stop pointing at it, make sure your child can't access the reward. If they ask for the reward, ask them what they get the reward for. Prompt as needed.
16. When your initial motivator is wearing thin, change the reward, and change the chart to keep things fresh.

### **A reminder about rules and rewards**

It is up to you to teach your child the rules and follow through on the standards you set. Your investment in the rules will pay off within a few weeks, so plan to stick to your guns for at least two weeks. If you are trying to teach a new rule, and you experience a power struggle and a big meltdown three days in row, keep trying! You are the adult, and it is your responsibility to set standards in your home. The whole point of rules is to teach your child constructive behaviors that will help them navigate their life. This can be challenging for parents of children with autism, but it is highly important for a child to learn that they are not always the boss.