

Make Safety And Respect The Way It Is *Preventing Bullying, Harassment and Peer Violence with Clearly Stated Rules.*

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Personal safety for children and teens in group environments can be protected with clearly stated rules that can prevent many problems from developing in the first place.

The new Teen Center of the San Lorenzo Valley, a rural community near Santa Cruz, is a crowded happy place, complete with video games, pinball machines, and a pool table. Local teens have fun in their center and help take responsibility for making things work because the place was built and the programs were organized based on their input.

When the teen advisors were asked what kind of rules they wanted, they first came up with a list of 20, which were condensed down to the six most important ones. These rules are hand-painted on the brown wall in cream ink, with a frame like an old fashioned WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE poster, as follows:

The Way It Is

1. Take care of the Teen Center.
2. Keep your hands and feet to yourself.
3. Be respectful of people's differences.
4. Don't touch others' stuff without permission.
5. Use polite language and manners.
6. Listen to directions and respect staff.

Just as we have explicit rules of driving for safety on the road, we need to have explicit rules of behavior for other settings in order to protect personal safety for children and teens. When appropriate rules are agreed

upon, clearly stated, and enforced, everyone benefits. Rights are protected. Time is spent effectively. Property is taken care of and shared fairly. People have the freedom to do what they came to this place to do in a safe and comfortable way.

Too often, in the name of freedom, adults abdicate their authority with children and teenagers, allowing them to behave in ways that can interfere with the rights of others or are potentially destructive.

Often, this abdication is in reaction to adults having lived with rules themselves as children that were arbitrary or unfair. The purpose of rules is to create a structure that is supportive of freedom--freedom to learn, freedom to play, freedom to grow, freedom to relax. This means that rules should be examined and reevaluated constantly in order to make sure that they are appropriate to the setting and the agreed-upon purpose of people gathered within that setting.

In order to ensure the freedom for everyone to be emotionally and physically safe, rules that prevent all forms of violence and abuse are especially important. Destructive behaviors include all forms of bullying and harassment such as name-calling, shunning, ridiculing, threatening words, mimicking, physically hurting, intimidating gestures or expressions, and unwanted or inappropriate sexual language or actions. These behaviors all affect the level of personal safety for children and teens, and they need to be clearly designated as unacceptable, with consequences spelled out.

In every setting where you or your children spend time, take responsibility for knowing, upholding, and evaluating the rules. Find out what these policies are in your school, business, or organization. Review these rules to see whether they make sense. Ask for clarification or revision. Define the ground rules with your family, updating them as your children get older and situations change.

Make sure that rules--like the painted sign on the San Lorenzo Valley Teen Center wall, are clearly posted for everyone to see.

Personal safety for children and teens – and also for adults – depends on all of us taking responsibility for the environments in which we or our children participate. This is part of building safety and confidence for everyone, and that's just....**THE WAY IT IS!**