



The Myth of Parenting Consistency: It's OK to be Human

By Judy Arnall

When I became a parent, I read more than 494 parenting books. I discovered that most books promote the concept of parental consistency. Rules must be set, and strictly enforced. Children want limits and parents must provide them, whether they are useful for the family or not. Parents must never waiver. Mean what you say and say what you mean.

However, life is not consistent. With seven people in our house with different needs, interests, and moods, I've tried to establish consistent ground rules, and then found myself breaking them just as much as the children.

For example, we have a white berber carpet in the playroom, (don't ask me why I was insane enough to get a white carpet), so one of my rules was: NO FOOD IN THE PLAYROOM. I soon found myself serving the children dry crackers or cereal in the playroom while they were watching cartoons, because it helped us all get out the door faster when we needed to go somewhere. Then, I decided to change the rule to NO WET FOOD IN THE PLAYROOM. However, the toddler had her juice in a spill proof cup and as hard as she tried, she would never get liquid on the carpet. The rule changed to WET FOOD ALLOWED ONLY IF NONE WAS SPILLED, which worked until the babysitter was not as careful monitoring spillage as me. The rule changed to WET FOOD ALLOWED ONLY IF NO BABYSITTERS OR DAD IS HOME. Eventually, the rule changed daily depending on what the food was and who was eating it and how tolerant I was feeling that day if mishaps occurred.

It hit me one day trying to explain the rule variations to the kids when they asked, "What EXACTLY IS the food rule in the playroom?" The rules had changed daily but not my underlying NEED, which was to keep the white carpet somewhat clean. This was only one issue of many in our family. It occurred to me that parenting is not a consistent endeavor and I sought to find a parenting program that endorses my feelings! Surely, I'm not the only parent struggling with this.

I finally found a book that teaches that all my children's behaviour falls into two basic categories: acceptable to me and unacceptable to me. Spaghetti on the

rug is unacceptable. Dried crackers on the rug were acceptable because they are easy to vacuum up. In addition, the acceptance level we feel towards our children's behaviour is dependent on three factors: The parent, the environment, and the child. First, let's look at the parent. How I feel about food on the rug is dependent on how tired I am that day, how stressed I am, or how elated I am. On a day that everything is wonderful and going well, I could probably even handle lasagna spills. On a day that I am sick with the flu, a few cracker crumbs would send me to the madhouse. Secondly, the environment is a factor: spaghetti spilled on the patio outside is less of a problem than spaghetti on the rug. And lastly, the particular child is a factor: I am much more forgiving of a two-year-old spilling food because they are learning eating skills, than I am of an eight-year-old that was carelessly watching Nintendo more than where his fork was going.

The division of acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour is altered every hour, every day and every minute just as circumstances, and moods, and priorities change. So I've discovered that what is important is not setting rules or limits. It's important to judge each incident on its own merit. My need was to keep my white berber carpet clean and my children's need was to avoid missing their favorite shows during meal time. That was what we had to work around. Each day, we negotiate what can and can't be eaten in the playroom. Everyone agrees to a solution on a daily basis according to needs rather than unyielding rules.

Negotiation has taken the place of many of our rules and limits. That way, everyone's needs and interests are being met. We have become more loving, open, honest, and happy. Negotiation is saying to your child, "Honey, I know you can usually eat your lunch in the playroom, but I'm feeling a little under the weather today and really don't want to clean anything up if it spills. Would you mind eating upstairs today?" With an approach like that, I have not been refused yet. Negotiating to meet needs so everyone is happy is a lot easier than setting a rule, waiting until a child breaks it and enforcing a punishment. As one child said, "We don't have discipline problems in our house. We have conflicts that need to be negotiated."

Children don't need limits to feel secure. Children really want to feel accepted, and they frequently will go along with a limit or rule in order to gain parent's acceptance. This doesn't mean children want limits or rules. Actually, they would prefer complete freedom from them. That's why so many power struggles erupt over rules. What is truly important and what children really need is to know what exactly their parent's expectations and needs are. And these change daily. The problem with limits is that they so often do not take into account the child's needs. Negotiation and problem-solving does, however.

The times that we do have specific rules, it really helps to involve the kids and bring them on board while setting rules that work for them too. It takes account of parental and child's needs and finds a way to meet both. Can children adapt to the inconsistency? Of course! They know every subtlest detail of difference in

rules between their house and their friends' houses. As young as eighteen months of age, they know the difference between Mom's needs and Dad's needs. They know the difference between church expectations and playground expectations. They know and accept that you must wear a seatbelt in a car but don't have to on a city bus, school bus, or even a taxi. Knowing the specific expectations of each situation makes a person more secure than knowing the general rule that tries to cover all situations. My children know I need my carpet to stay clean. They now make better choices to meet that need. And that's what growing up is all about: making good choices in differing circumstances.

Life is about change and inconsistency. It's about having different feelings, moods, and needs from one day to the next. No parent or child should feel guilty about being human.

Negotiation allows us to live together harmoniously.

Judy Arnall is a professional international award-winning Parenting and Teacher Conference Speaker, and Trainer, Mom of five children, and author of the best-selling book, ***Discipline Without Distress: 135 tools for raising caring, responsible children without time-out, spanking, punishment or bribery*** and the new DVD, ***Plugged-In Parenting: Connecting with the digital generation for health, safety and love*** as well as the new book, ***The Last Word on Parenting Advice*** www.professionalparenting.ca (403) 714-6766 jarnall@shaw.ca



Copyright permission granted for "reproduction without permission" of this article in whole or part, if the above credit is included in its entirety.