

ACTING ON LIMITS WITHOUT REMINDING

Key Principles

- Using I-Messages
- Understanding the child's goal
- Using parental maturity
- Using positive consistency

MEET... Karen and four-year-old Ryan. Karen wants to establish clearer expectations for Ryan and follow through on them consistently. Karen is having difficulty, though, deciding how much she can expect Ryan to do for himself and what will happen if she doesn't remind him to follow through.



Using I-messages.....

In *Episode 3*, we saw how easily Anthony accepted Tara's discomfort with his limited potato-peeling skill. When Tara took over because she was afraid Anthony might hurt himself, she didn't comment on his skill (or lack

of skill!). She simply told him she was uncomfortable with the way things were going. Now imagine yourself in a similar situation: two friends or co-workers are teaching you how to do something you've never done before. You fumble around a bit, then make a mistake. One friend says, "You really aren't catching on.

You'll have to let me finish up now. We don't have time for your mistakes." The other friend says, "I don't think I gave a very good demonstration. Let me finish this one and explain more clearly what I'm doing." If you're like a lot of people, you might react to the first friend by feeling unfairly accused. You might even feel angry and contemplate ways to retaliate. In contrast, your reaction to the second person would probably be appreciative, making you

more able to learn the task. The small word "I" is the reason for this big difference in your reaction. The first helper used you-messages, a fast track to putting people on the defensive. The second helper used I-messages to talk about herself and what she could do to make the situation better. This structure opens the door to understanding and cooperation. Remember from *Episode 3* that an effective I-message includes a statement of how you feel, and ends with a plan to improve the situation. The diagram on the next page will help you construct effective I-messages that your children will be receptive to.



Example of an I-message

I feel _____	when I see _____	. I'd like to _____
upset	toys all over.	come up with a clean-up plan.
unhappy	the dishes on the table.	do the dishes together.
worried	that your homework isn't done.	set aside time when we both study.

Using parental maturity

In Episode 7, we saw how Stephanie made great progress accepting her natural authority to establish and follow through on reasonable limits. In this episode, we will see how parental maturity involves accepting that sometimes things need to be done because they need to be done, not because they are fun or interesting. Certainly, one goal in life is to experience pleasure and joy, and a parent's role is to help children experience these basic human feelings. But, there are also times when things that are not fun need to be done. A mature parent helps his child understand this fact, and supports the child as she learns to follow through when the natural inclination might be to avoid an unpleasant task.

Understanding the child's goal

People do things for reasons. Often our reasons, or goals, are clear and straightforward. I'm hungry so I eat. Sometimes, though, our goals are not so straightforward. Consider this: Some friends promise to go to the movie with me, then forget. I was looking forward to spending time with the group and going to the movie. I am disappointed, even a little miffed. During the next week, I say no each time one of my friends asks me to participate in an activity. When I see one of them look disappointed, I feel a little flush of satisfaction. My original goal was to have fun and feel like I mattered to my friends. But when I was forgotten, I felt slighted and even discouraged about my importance in my friendship circle. At that point my goal changed: a bit of revenge crept in.

Just as I want to feel like I belong and matter to my group of friends, children want to feel they belong and matter in their family—the first group they belong to. If children cannot find constructive ways to participate in and contribute to family life, they become discouraged. The desire to belong is so strong, though, that they will find ways to influence the family even when discouraged and even when their contribution isn't constructive. For example if they feel ignored, they might make constant annoying bids for *attention*. If they still do not receive the attention they are looking for, they might escalate their behavior into a *power* struggle. If they feel unfairly treated, they might seek *revenge* by being destructive. If they become completely discouraged about their status in the family group, they might act helpless. Helplessness ensures that not much will be expected of them, allowing them to *avoid* the potential embarrassment of failure. Understanding how these goals motivate misbehavior will help you to be encouraging and interact more constructively with your child. (Page 82 has more information on this important topic.)



Being positive and consistent

We've learned in earlier episodes that inconsistency breeds confusion and encourages children to test limits. When children test limits frequently, opportunities to be encouraging

and have positive interactions can be few and far between. A parent's desire to avoid conflict with his or her child is a common reason for not sticking to limits. Unfortunately, this desire to avoid conflict in the short run often breeds greater conflict in the long run as the child escalates his demands and expects to renegotiate agreements. Being consistent helps avoid these pitfalls and creates a predictable framework for positive contact between you and your child.



A CLOSER LOOK..

Applying key principles in this episode

Using I-messages

Suggestion or Requirement

Karen is often indirect with Ryan, confusing him and setting the stage for power struggles. For example, she asks him what milk is for and when he says "to drink," she suggests he drink it, rather than asking him to. Then, she reminds him many times to do something she has not really even asked him to do! Later, she asks him what "we" do after making a mess, but doesn't say he is required to help clean up. If what she really wants is for Ryan to, for example, drink his milk, she needs to say so specifically. Using I-messages will help her communicate more effectively with Ryan, reducing the frequency of power struggles. For example, instead of asking him what milk is for, she could try saying, "When I see milk sitting out, I feel bad because it is going to waste. I'd like to put it in the fridge now if you're not going to drink it." Then of course, she must put the milk away if he doesn't drink it. She must also resist giving him reminders to drink it. In her efforts to protect Ryan from disappointment, Karen realizes that she often doesn't express to Ryan what she is really feeling or wanting. This state of affairs places undue stress on Karen and creates a climate that encourages Ryan—in an effort to find out where the boundaries are—to test Karen and renegotiate agreements. If Kathy can use I-messages consistently, along with setting clear limits and following through consistently, Ryan's behavior will change in response. As Ryan tests less and power struggles diminish, there will be more opportunities for the two to enjoy each other's company and build the relationship on a positive footing.

Using parental maturity

Ryan Can Contribute Even if It Is Not Always Fun

Karen wants Ryan to have a joyous life. Yet, as a result of trying to ensure this for him, she experiences a lot of frustration and stress, and limited joy herself in her interactions with Ryan. Her protection of Ryan also gives him an unrealistic idea about how the world works. As the adult in the relationship, it is Karen's job to help Ryan understand how to be a productive participant in the family, and later in his larger world at school and in society. In the long run, Ryan will be better served if Karen establishes expectations, limits and consequences that teach Ryan the importance of following through on agreements and contributing a fair share toward necessary tasks.

Understanding the child's goal

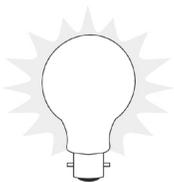
Earlier in this episode, we presented the four most common mistaken goals children use to feel influential in a group if they don't feel accepted or appreciated: attention-seeking, power, revenge, and avoidance. Ryan pulls Karen into power struggles and ensures he is the primary focus of her attention by ignoring her requests (milk-drinking and clean-up), demanding attention inappropriately (annoying the adults while they play), and throwing dramatic tantrums (when he is sent to his room). These behaviors leave little time to enjoy and build the relationship. In fact, Karen behaves the way she does to avoid having a conflict with Ryan. To turn this around, Karen needs to establish definite expectations; communicate them clearly, with I-messages when appropriate; and set up and follow through with reasonable consequences. This will take the steam out of Ryan's bids for power. As the power struggles subside and things go more smoothly between the two, Karen can take advantage of this change to give Ryan lots of attention and encouragement for contributing to the family and using his influence in constructive ways. This attention and encouragement will give him less reason to make inappropriate bids for attention.

Using positive consistency

From our discussion of principles in this episode, we can see that Karen has many tools and options for improving her relationship with Ryan. He clearly wants to be influential in the family. Unfortunately, Karen's inconsistency has taught him how to be influential in nonproductive ways. However, if Karen is encouraging, establishes clear limits, resists renegotiating them, and follows through firmly and kindly with reasonable consequences when necessary, she can create a predictable environment that will give Ryan opportunities to find his place in the family and see that his contributions are valued.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Avoid confusing expectations with choices.
- Don't let children undo reasonable decisions.
- Don't give in out of fear of conflict.
- Be unimpressed with children's sense of drama.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. When you establish a reasonable limit, do you allow your child to change, or renegotiate, what will happen? If you do, develop a clear I-message you can use to respond to the renegotiation effort. For example: I feel that asking you to set the table is a reasonable request. When I notice it's not getting done, I get concerned that you will miss dinner because you won't have a plate where I can serve your food.
2. Does your child sometimes ignore your requests? If so, how can you handle yourself so he will be more likely to cooperate? Ask yourself if you're teaching him to ignore you by reminding. Or, perhaps, your requests are not clear. Are they phrased as requests or questions? Select one area where your child seems to ignore you, and work to make your requests clear.