

PLANNING AHEAD TO BE MORE CONSISTENT



Key Principles

- Managing yourself
- Establishing rules and routines
- Using time-outs

MEET... Corrine, Mike, five-year-old Michael and 20-month-old Christian. Corrine and Michael want to plan ahead more so they can interact constructively with their children. They are also working on avoiding yelling and have established a rule that no one—parents or children—is allowed to yell. They are finding that it is a hard rule to follow.



Managing yourself

How many episodes so far in this series feature “managing yourself” as a key principle? Five up to now, and there will be more. Why so many? Because learning to manage yourself well is one of the most important strategies you can learn to improve your relationship with your child. For example, when less time is spent responding to bids for attention and being drawn into power struggles, there is more time for parents and children to enjoy each other and build the relationship. Another important reason to manage yourself well is that in everything you do, you serve as a role model for your child. For example, if you yell and become angry easily, your child will see that as acceptable behavior. Even if she doesn’t yell with you out of fear, the chances are good she will yell with others she sees as less powerful. The victim could be a younger sibling, friend or classmate. By yelling at your child, you are teaching her to accept intimidation from those more powerful than she is, while encouraging her to intimidate those who are less powerful.

Establishing rules and routines

Rules and routines help family life run smoothly. They provide stability and predictability in children’s lives. Without rules and consistent follow-through, everything is up for grabs. In *Episode 5* we saw how this state of affairs made it difficult for Stephanie to resist giving into unreasonable demands from her children. Power struggles and tantrums were the result. On the other hand, we saw in *Episode 9* how Esther used rules and routines to avoid power struggles and provide opportunities for her children to feel encouraged and capable while helping prepare dinner. We can see that stability and predictability are important to children’s well-being. They are equally important for parents. Having a plan for fairly and reasonably handling chal-

lenging situations ensures that everyone in the family knows what to expect. These shared expectations increase the odds that children will be cooperative. In addition, having a plan in place makes it easy to get things back on track when misunderstanding, disappointments or special problems arise.

Using time-outs

No one would argue that time-outs can be punitive, but can they serve a useful purpose? If handled appropriately, a time-out can function effectively as a special type of logical consequence in which the parent steps in to give the child information about how the social world works. Time-outs should be used sparingly to interrupt behavior and provide a time to cool-down, not to punish a child. In earlier episodes we've learned that when a child is hurting another person, it's reasonable to separate him or her from the group. This gives children the important message that being aggressive means being separated from their group. Time-outs can also serve the important function of interrupting a child's behavior and providing a cool-down period. If used in this way, children need to know ahead of time when they will be used and why (for example, when the child is damaging property, being unreasonable, throwing a tantrum, or hurting another person). Don't make the time-out unpleasant; then it is a punishment. Help children use a time-out to learn how to cool down and think about their behavior. Ideally, let them return when they are ready, not when you or a timer tells them they can come back. If the child returns too soon, he can simply return to time-out for a little more cooling-down time. A parent might think a child is not getting the point if he goes to his room and enjoys himself. In fact, the time-out has served well to redirect the child's attention and behavior. When parents use a time-out as a punishment, a child will often seek revenge by escalating his behavior. If a cycle of punishment and retaliation is established, it can be very difficult to build a positive relationship with your child.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Managing yourself

Lights, Camera, Imagine You're Watching Yourself

One of Corrine and Mike's goals is to not yell. When Mike takes Michael to his room because he argues with his mother, he is very calm. Normally he gets angry, loses his temper and yells. But knowing that he is being videotaped helps him control himself. As a result, he realizes now that he can remain calm and relaxed when Michael's behavior is challenging. When parents feel frustrated by their children's behavior—often because they haven't established rules and routines and don't follow through with consequences—it can be difficult to practice good self-management. Try Mike's approach. Imagine you are on camera, or watching yourself on film as you interact with your children. If Corrine, in her mind's eye, could see herself mimic Michael before she actually did it, she would be able to see how discouraging it is to be ridiculed. If she could use the same technique, she would also be able to see how confusing it is for Michael that there is no hard and fast rule about snacks. In this light, Michael's frequent requests for snacks, which could be described as annoying, can be seen instead as a failure on Corrine's part to establish and follow through with a reasonable

rule. Christian's habit of throwing food falls into the same category. When he throws his food, Corrine and Mike might or might not remove his dish. Whether they do or not depends on how busy they are, how close to Christian's bedtime it is, and other things that Christian is unaware of. If Corrine and Michael establish a rule that meals are over when food is thrown, and stick to the rule regardless of other distractions, their self-management will solve the problem. Without trying to control Christian's behavior, food throwing will go by the wayside as Christian realizes his meal will disappear if he throws food. Imagining, or thinking through, how you want to interact with your child will help you remain calm and reasonable even when your child is not.

Establishing rules and routines

Opportunities Abound to Test Limits

There is a lot of testing going on in Corrine and Mike's house. Michael tests the limits about the number and type of snacks he can have. He tests the limits about staying in his room during a time-out. Even 20-month-old Christian tests the limits of acceptable mealtime behavior by throwing his food. It's interesting to note, though, that Michael willingly puts his shoes up before joining Corrine for a story. Corrine has been working with Michael to put away items that have been left out; his cooperation shows that he is quite willing and able to go along with a reasonable routine or rule. Both Corrine and Mike want to interact more positively with their children. Michael's cooperation at story time shows this is quite possible. Corrine and Mike can increase the frequency of this kind of cooperation and enjoyment in each other's company by reducing the children's confusion about acceptable behavior. Rules and routines for other problem areas such as snacks and mealtime will make life more predictability and stable for Michael and Christian. When life is more predictable and stable, they will have less need to try to establish boundaries by testing the limits.



Using time-outs

Time-Out Becomes Attention Time

When Mike takes Michael to his room for a time-out, it is apparently because Mike has already established that Michael would go to his room if he continued to pester his parents about a snack. By insisting Michael stay on his bed, it becomes difficult for Corrine and Mike to manage the time-out, and the time-out slides toward being a punishment. However, if the time-out were presented as an opportunity for Michael to think about his behavior, it would be less punitive. The difficulty, though, with this approach is that there are no clear rules about snack. If there were, the time-out could be a way for Michael to cool down a bit in his demands. (If there were a rule that was enforced consistently, things would probably not have gotten to this point in the first place.) However, once Michael is in time-out, Corrine and Michael make matters even more confusing for Michael by giving him lots of attention at a time when he is supposed to be separated from the group. Corrine goes into Michael's room to insist he get on his bed. Then Michael gets more attention when he goes to the bathroom and afterwards when he can't get his pants zipped up. All in all, a rather successful venture on Michael's part.

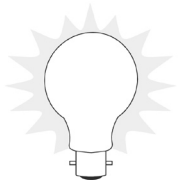


From his perspective, he succeeded in getting his parents upset, then he got them to come into his bedroom, then into the bathroom to supervise him and later to help him zip up his pants. If Mike and Corrine's goal was to punish Michael, it didn't work very well since he was rewarded with lots of attention from them. If the goal was to encourage Michael to reflect on his own behavior, that didn't work very well either. After all, he was so busy getting his parents to interact with him, when would he have had time for reflection?

Time-outs are tricky. It is easy for them to become a punishment or a way for children to extract more time and attention from their parents. Use them sparingly and only when children understand why: if they have hurt another person or they need a cool down time.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Apply clear and predictable rules consistently.
- Thinking through in advance reduces the chance of becoming upset.
- Minimize contact during time-outs.
- Establish routines with daily tasks.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Is there a regular activity in your household that doesn't go well and that doesn't have an established routine? If there is, set up a simple, easy-to-follow routine. If your child is old enough, discuss the idea with him or her and get ideas about what to include in the routine. At the end of the week, check to see if things are going more smoothly.
2. Pick one issue or activity that doesn't go well between you and your child. In your mind's eye, review a past situation and watch yourself to find how your own behaviors contribute to the situation. For the next week, change your behavior and refrain from commenting on or trying to influence your child's inappropriate behavior. At the end of the week, evaluate whether the situation has improved or not.

