

Teaching Children with Autism to Follow Rules

There is minimal research in the way of reliably teaching rule-governed behavior. There are many theories in the field of behavior analysis regarding why people follow rules, but little evidence-based practices regarding specific teaching methodologies or programs for specifically teaching rules (a system called “Positive Behavioral Support” gives us the most relevant ideas). As educators, we primarily rely on the concepts of either delayed gratification or punishment to teach typically-developing people how to follow rules.

For students with autism, however, teaching rules can be a different task entirely. For lower functioning students, we rely on the immediacy of the relationship between demands, responses, and reinforcement to teach desired behavior. However, because there are only abstract (if any) cues of when to engage in rule-following behavior and almost never a natural reinforcing consequence to it, rule-governed behavior is rarely specifically taught to students on the lower-functioning end of the spectrum.

Frequently, it is students on the higher-functioning end of the spectrum who demonstrate difficulty consistently engaging in rule-governed behavior, and we are faced with the contradiction that they may engage in “typical” behavior in many other areas (such as academics) but may lack the level of abstract thought skills required to follow rules (of school and society). We must be creative in how we educate this population on the benefits of following rules. We utilize the principles of behavior analysis, but also just *good teaching* to provide all students with the necessary information, prompting, follow through, and perhaps contrived opportunities to be exposed to the situations related to rules in a safe, controlled setting.

The following are some tips and guidelines on teaching rules to this population of students (note that these strategies are also relevant for teaching rules to *any* students):

- Write rules only in the positive. The rule should describe a specific behavior you want the student to perform and one that can be observed and practiced. Use basic language and no more than 5-6 words in the rule. Make sure the rules are relevant to the classroom setting and enforceable by all classroom personnel.
 - Examples of rules include:
 - Walk in the classroom.
 - Stay in your seat.
 - Hand on pencils, laps, or desks only.
 - Use friendly words.
 - Raise your hand to speak.

Limit the number of rules initially to 5-6 total. If rules do use subjective terms such as, “friendly,” the gauge of appropriate rule-following is what the average person in society would consider that to look like.

- List the rules (numbered for easy reference) in large writing and post in an obvious place in the classroom for the purpose of referring to them easily.
- Teach the rules one at a time to the students as you would teach any other lesson. Explain (briefly) the reason for the rule, demonstrate how it looks to follow the rule, have the students practice following the rule, and give immediate feedback (preferably positive). Ask the question, “What’s the rule?” and prompt choral responding so the response to this question is rote.

➤ Enforce rule-following:

- Any time you see the students following a rule, point it out. This may involve verbal descriptive praise (tell them what they did that is earning the praise), giving tickets/tokens, or any other reinforcement utilized in the classroom/on campus. Reinforcement must be *frequent* (as many occasions of rule-following as possible), *immediate* (give right after or during the rule-following behavior), and *contingent* (only occurring after or during rule-following behavior, not any other behavior).
- If a student breaks a rule, in a calm, neutral tone of voice ask, “What’s the rule about_____?” Ideally, the student will respond by reciting the rule previously taught. If the student does not respond after several seconds, state, “The rule is_____. What is the rule?” and wait for a response. Once the student responds appropriately, say, “Now show me.” When the student engages in the rule-following behavior, briefly praise the behavior and move on to the task at hand (this process should only take a few seconds). After several minutes of continuous rule-following behavior, provide more praise/reinforcement.
- Note: it is imperative that the adult interaction between the two above listed strategies differs regarding tone of voice, eye contact, and energy. Reinforcing rule-following should occur in an enthusiastic and highly preferred fashion. Addressing rule-breaking should occur in a calm, neutral and detached tone of voice. *Never reprimand students for rule-breaking! This typically only functions as attention for the student for inappropriate behavior.*

Over time, if the above strategies are implemented with all students, rule-following behavior should increase. If necessary, change the rules. After changing rules, re-teach as described above. Re-teach current rules periodically, and only fade the level of reinforcement for rule-following once the students have demonstrated a consistent ability to follow them.