

Grandma's Rule: Teaching Influence and Channeling Willfulness

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(FMCC)

Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Introduction | 3 |
| Grandma’s Rule | 3 |
| Implementation. | 4 |
| Benefits to Grandma’s Rule | 5 |
| Summary | 6 |



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Introduction:

When I was a boy, I used to love playing in creeks, and one of my favorite pursuits was to attempt to dam up the creek and stop the water from proceeding downstream. Of course, I never achieved this goal because by damming the creek I only made the creek “more willful” until it pushed over and around my dam.

A child’s will is similar to this creek. When I tell them “No” and attempt to force them to stop or not to do something, I wind up, instead, frustrating them and building their willfulness to defy me and go around my authority. And if this child is already rather willful, I wind up honing their ability to sneak, bully, and defy me in order to get their way.

But in playing in those creeks, I eventually found a way to make my dams formidable enough to hold the river back; simply by digging a trough around the dam and “showing” the creek how it could still get downstream to where it wanted to go. This is the essence of “Grandma’s Rule.” ■

Grandma’s Rule:

Grandma knew how to gain our compliance. She would bake an apple pie and wave it under our noses and say: “Do you want some apple pie?” “Then eat your dinner.” “But you don’t have to eat your dinner, but there is no other way to get apple pie.” So of course, after smelling that fresh baked pie, and being told we didn’t have to but there was no other way to get it, we ate the dinner quickly. Not because dinner was so good, but it was the ticket to getting what we wanted- her fresh baked apple pie! ■

Implementation:

Implementing “Grandma’s rule” with our children is as simple as asking them what they want or would like to do, and offer door #1 (the door of compliance): “Sure you can” “If you choose to clean your room (comply with my request of you) then you can go to your friend’s house and play (get that which you are wanting at this moment); “But you don’t have to clean your room.” And then

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we give them the choice of door #2: “You can choose to not clean your room and leave it a mess, (we give them the choice to not comply to take all the fun and power out of them stealing this option) but then you won’t be going over your friend’s house today.” Then, because this “dam” will frustrate the child, we immediately go back to presenting door

#1 again: “But if you do want to go to your friend’s house and play, all that it would take is to choose to clean your room; it’s up to you.”

The main elements of this approach are when they come to you with a request: 1) you outline how they can get that which they are wanting (you dig a trough), 2) you give them the choice and not demand that they do, 3) offer that they do not have to do this (a reminder that no one is forcing them), 4) you outline that going down this road guarantees they will not get their way this day (this is the dam), and 5) you end on a positive note (reminding them about the way they can earn getting their way).

A key to the success of this approach is to have a plan ready for when they choose door #2 (noncompliance) and then “steal” theirs anyway (they don’t clean their room and still go to their friend’s house). In this case I recommend a standard rule for “stealing”: if they

steal theirs, then that item is taken off the menu and they cannot earn this until they choose to earn it back (clean their room in this case) but not get it that day (they do not get to go to their friend’s house that day). This places this item back on the menu so that it can be earned another day.

Another helpful suggestion for when the child chooses door #2 is to remind them they can still earn this privilege (going to their friend’s house to play), today, tomorrow, or whenever they choose to earn it (clean their room). This helps the child to see that getting their way is still possible and so reduces their frustrations of the moment.

In this approach all toys, freedoms, and privileges are “behind the counter” and available to be earned. Like in the grocery store, they are within reach (you don’t have to take the TV out of their room), with the prices marked (you will always tell them the price for what they are wanting), and you have to pay for it before you use it (for if you steal it from the store there is a standard consequence applied for shoplifting). ■

Benefits to Grandma's Rule:

This approach develops a child's ability to wait for what they want (builds frustration tolerance- the ability to be OK with not getting what you want when you want it), raises their self-esteem because anything they get they have earned (children get "spoiled" or over-indulged when they are given their way without anything being expected of them and so learn to tantrum to get their way), and builds your parental authority with them due to the fact that with compliance they get their way, and tantrums are not compliance and so guarantee they won't get their way. This is truly a "no brainer" as the will learns how to get its way just like the river (another no-brainer) "learns" how to get downstream by going through the trough.

There are several benefits to this approach: 1) it uses the motivation of the moment (children are existentialists and live in the moment, so what they want right now

is what motivates them to comply and go through the trough), 2) it is simple; there are no charts necessary, and no tokens or points to keep track of, 3) it is easy for the other parent or parent figure to follow-through with whichever door the child chooses, and so there is consistency between parents, and 4) it teaches children to channel their wills to do the hard work in order to get their way in life.

Also with this approach, you are no longer Scrooge saying "No" to every request and building their frustrations, defiance, and negative feelings towards you; instead, you become Santa Claus, always saying "Sure you can" and showing them how to get whatever they are wanting at the time. Let's say they want to drive your car. "Sure you can." "If you choose to get your driver's license, take driver's education, and pay your car insurance for 6 months, you can drive my car." ■

Summary:

So if you want to simplify your life, develop your child's frustration tolerance and inhibitory control (they have to apply brakes on their impulses to grab-and-go), raise their self-esteem (as everything and every privilege is earned and so they feel proud of what they have accomplished), teach them how to get their way in life (this is how real life works after all), reduce tantrums, and gain compliance, all while simplifying your life and building their respect for you, then I would recommend you give this approach a try. ■