

## Different Rules, Different Houses

(Discipline Within Stepfamilies)

By Judy Graybill



A common problem faced by stepfamilies has to do with discipline across two separate households. Disciplining children is difficult in itself. No parent likes to discipline their children, but it's a necessity in order to get the desired results - following the rules. You set up the rules in the first place because it is important for you to convey specific values, manners, and ways of behaving.

It takes a lot of work to consistently enforce the rules. Enforcing the rules sometimes means giving punishment or imposing restrictions that your child is less than happy about. Yet, you stick to your guns because you know it is the right thing to do. You know that it will make your child a better person - stronger, smarter, more well-rounded, more courteous, or the like. Because of that, and because you know it is temporary, you bear through the grumbling and resentment directed toward you. You know that he/she will eventually forgive you and your relationship will go back to normal - whatever "normal" is for you both.

Ahhh! You breathe a sigh of relief. Then your child spends some time at the other home - of the other biological parent. When he/she returns, he/she is behaving contradictory to what is acceptable by your standards. What is going on? You already spoke to him/her about the issue. You explained why it is wrong. Worst of all, now you have to punish him/her again. You set out to do your duty, which also includes yet another discussion of what is appropriate vs. non-appropriate behavior and why. When you finish your short lecture, your son/daughter innocently looks up at you and says, "But Dad (or Mom) lets me do it at his (her) house! I understand what you said, but I'm confused about why it's wrong here and not there."

Now what? Your heart jumps into your throat, making it hard to swallow. You feel your pulse quicken as your blood starts to boil. Your mind starts racing. What should you say? You know why it is wrong. It is very clear in your mind how the action went against the values you were trying to instill. You're upset, or perhaps even furious, that you even have to deal with this. What on earth is the other biological parent thinking? How could he (she) possibly think this is OK? How could he (she) put me in this predicament? And what on earth am I supposed to say?

You think very hard. You know you should respect the other parent and shouldn't say anything bad about him/her; but your thoughts of the other person are far from nice right now. You think even harder. Beads of sweat start to form on your forehead. Your child breaks the silence, "I don't see anything wrong with it. If I can do it over there, it must not be wrong." You don't know how much time passed, but his statement jolts you back to reality. You have to say something and you have to say it now. But what?

The best thing to say is simple. "Every household has a different set of rules. In that house, what you did (name the act) may be fine, but in this house, it is against the rules. End of story." Some children might just accept this and end the discussion. However, many others would continue to prod you to explain what is "wrong", "right", and why. This is very tricky territory. It is a delicate balance to explain all of this coherently without making the other parent sound bad, especially on the spur of the moment and/or when you're fuming that he (she) allowed the unacceptable behavior in the first place. For these reasons, I don't recommend trying to explain anything at this time. The above statement is a safe and simple way to end the discussion, not badmouth the other parent, and reestablish the rules in your household. In fact, it's OK to NOT have any further conversation about the matter if you're not comfortable enough to do it. However, if you feel strongly about clearing things up, at least take advantage of the time you bought yourself with this line. The statement speaks for itself and nothing more needs to be said right now. This will give you time to shake off any negative feelings you may be harboring about the other parent - or at least suppress them enough for the discussion.

Keep in mind that kids easily adapt to different rules in different situations. In fact, they have already adapted. They have different rules in each one of their friends' houses. They have as many sets of rules as the number of friends and other places they visit. They've also adjusted to the rules in their school classroom, athletic organizations, and social groups they belong to. These include church, 4-H, Girl Scouts, and Little League to name a few.

The ideal situation would be for all parents of both households to sit down together to draw up the rules, as well as the consequences for breaking the rules, that would be the same in both households. However, this is far from practical in most stepfamilies. Below, I have listed a few things to keep in mind regarding rules and discipline. However, if this is a critical and complicated issue in your family, I suggest you consult a Stepfamily Coach.

The important items to remember are these:

1. It's OK to have different rules in each household because kids are already accustomed to having different rules when visiting their friends, going to church, or participating in a social group.
2. It is not necessary to give an explanation of the differences. It is just simply "different" - not "wrong" or "right".
3. If it is important to you that your child understands the underlying values being taught, take the time to think about what you're going to say.
4. Be sure you don't hold resentment toward the other parent, or have suppressed it well. This will make it easier to not accidentally bad-mouth him/her.
5. If or when it is possible, work with the parent (s) in the other household to establish rules and consequences for the children that will be effective in both houses.

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