

Rules vs. Principles

Danielle Conger

Recently, while attending the Live and Learn Conference near Boston, Massachusetts, I was fortunate enough to attend an ongoing seminar by Ben Lovejoy on Rules vs. Principles. I had heard about a previous year's presentation by Ben and Sandra Dodd, which got me thinking about this difference.

Until I was introduced to this topic on an online discussion group, I hadn't thought much about the difference between rules and principles, nor would I have thought it to be a terribly important distinction. Not, that is, until I realized it is absolutely fundamental to self-directed learning.

If organic learning means believing in a child's innate ability and motivation

to learn, offering her the freedom in which to learn and respecting the learning in every moment and method, then organic learning itself is dependent upon a freedom that must extend beyond the mere educational box of schooling. Freedom cannot be compartmentalized – allowed here, unaccepted there – if it is to flourish. Instead, it must be nourished, fed, encouraged and allowed to expand, so it may fully form the individuals that our children are and choose to become.

Freedom, however, does not mean a free-for-all. It does not mean freedom to destroy, hurt, abuse, manipulate or coerce others, which is a common misconception of those first encountering the ideas of self-directed learning or non-coercive parenting. Freedom has both natu-

ral and ethical limits. The key is to find those limits rather than to impose arbitrary or coercive ones in their stead. But, how exactly do we find those natural or ethical limits? That's where an exploration of rules vs. principles becomes particularly useful.

Rules are about authority, hierarchy, rigidity and absolutes. They are top down, reinforcing a power structure that relies upon a "might makes right" mentality – "because I say so", "I'm the parent, that's why", "That's just the way it goes". Rules exist outside the person to whom they are applied. They are externally enforced and prohibit the possibility of question, adaptation or exception.

Rules, laws, regulations, commandments all inherently imply punishment for transgression and silence for challenge. Break a rule, get grounded or spanked. Break a law, get a ticket or go to jail, and so on. More importantly, rules are inherently paradoxical because they are simultaneously absolute and arbitrary.

A parent both chooses the rules *and* chooses who must follow and when. A dictator makes rules that he is above. Even in a democracy, rules require interpretation, include loopholes and remain inconsistently and opportunely enforced. Our jails, for instance, are filled with the racial inconsistencies in the application of our laws. Rules and laws operate on the myth of universality while reality consistently reveals the arbitrary nature of their application.

Think about a household rule like "No eating in the bedroom", for instance. A decree like this is phrased as an absolute when it is far more likely an arbitrary restriction that will get thrown out the moment a parent wants ice cream during *E.R.* or the family wants to share a bowl of popcorn while snuggling in bed and watching a movie. As a rule, "No eating in the bedroom" comes across as an arbitrary absolute – a paradox!

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If the principle is “do no harm”, a creative child has a number of alternatives to drawing on the walls...and without arbitrary rules.



Principles, on the other hand, are about autonomy, mindful living, freedom and flexibility. Principles, rather than being absolute and automatic, demand careful thought and inquiry both to establish and apply. They represent a consensus about rightness, fairness and equity that, once agreed upon, provide an internal measure of conduct.

If, after careful consideration, we adopt a principle, we internalize it and thoughtfully apply it to countless situations throughout our life. There is no external threat demanding our adherence, only our own internal sense of right and wrong. Living by principles offers our children both the model of an ethical life and the opportunity to grow as ethical and just individuals.

Principles can also help simplify our lives. A single sound principle, fully explored and sincerely adopted, alleviates the need for a multitude of rules. Rules proliferate because they are isolated and specific while principles are few, simple and basic, cutting to the ethical origin or foundation of living in the world.

For instance, if we live by the principle “do no harm”, we eliminate the need for countless rigid household rules and invite, instead, creative thinking and problem solving. Suppose that a child wants to draw on the walls. If the rule is “no drawing on the walls”, the child’s choices are severely limited: draw on the wall and get in trouble or sacrifice her

own creative impulse. Or perhaps a creative child will quickly decide that although walls are off limits, furniture, computer monitors or appliances may not be. One rule rapidly necessitates multiple rules to cover all the possibilities a clever child might imagine.

If the principle is “do no harm”, however, that same creative child has a number of different choices, guided by a single principle and limited only by her own imaginative problem solving. Choosing to live by principles, the whole family is able to brainstorm for creative solutions to her desire to draw on a grand scale.

Principle-driven parents might explain that they don’t want paint ruined and the associated expense or labor of repainting. They might offer to put up a chalkboard, poster board or craft paper, test and find truly washable crayons, donate less-conspicuous wall space to create expression like a bedroom, closet or basement wall. Throughout this problem solving process, parents act as their children’s partners rather than punishers, fostering peace and trust in the relationship and leaving the child’s dreams and creativity intact.

Principles apply to all, not just a few and not just those low down on the hierarchical ladder because they are based on careful thought and consent. As Ben Lovejoy pointed out in his seminar, rules are something to get around by clever thinking whereas principles are guide-

lines for life. Sound principles, unlike rules, apply to everyone regardless of age or position because they represent the foundation of what’s right and fair for all. They demand thought and enable the flexibility necessary to ensure freedom for all family members, not just those “in charge”.

For parents, putting principles in place of rules provides the opportunity to model mindful living, problem solving and respect for others. Principles enable us to forge strong and thoughtful connections with our children as partners rather than adversaries, and they provide the ethical foundation for living mindfully in the world rather than in isolation, coercion or compliance.

Danielle Conger is a freelance writer who has a PhD only because she didn’t want to stop learning. She says her three wonderful children Julia (5), Emily (7) and Sam (4) (pictured above) have taught her



how unnecessary school is for learning and for thinking great thoughts. The family currently enjoys a busy unschooling lifestyle outside of Washington, D.C. with dad Jim, a puppy, 12 chickens and lots of wonderful wildlife. You can read all about their learning adventures online at www.danielleconger.com. -LL-