

Flexibility is a Virtue

How to pick your battles, preserve your sanity & protect the relationship

By Michael McQueen



A number of years ago I found myself engaged in a fascinating conversation with a marriage celebrant. Always interested to learn about different professions and walks of life, I asked this woman what stood out from all the weddings she had conducted in her 20 years of experience. Her answer was revealing.

“The most unhappy brides” she said, “are the ones who approach their big day with a long list of rules. I see it time and time again - the bride wants her wedding day to be perfect and so plans out every last detail of how everything will look, sound and feel. She knows the exact time the car will arrive to pick her up, the song beat at which each bridesmaid is meant to set off down the aisle, the tree under which the wedding photos will be taken at the moment of the day when the sunlight will be ‘just right.’”

She continued. “It doesn’t take much though. A cousin who gets held up with a flight delay, a bridesmaid who misses her beat cue on the song, or inclement weather and then everything falls to pieces. The moment something doesn’t go exactly according to plan, the devastated bride loses perspective and gets so upset it ruins her day and everyone else’s too.”

“The happiest brides are the ones with very few rules because they give themselves less ways to get upset.”

Later that day, I found myself reflecting on the observation this marriage celebrant had made and how true it is for life.

The reality is that we all approach everyday life with rules and expectations (many of which are unconscious) that dictate the circumstances under which we feel we can be happy, content and satisfied. It therefore follows that the more rules we have, the more opportunity we give for circumstances and other people to upset us and steal our joy.

And so I ask you as a parent or educator;

- How many of the rules you impose on your young people really matter?
- How many of the battles you fight with your children or students are *really* worth fighting?
- Is it possible that you are your own worst enemy – blaming everyone else for your disappointment, frustration and upset when really the responsibility lies with you and the rules you cling to?



None of this is to suggest that rules are the enemy and that we should invite anarchy into the home or classroom. After all, years of research in child developmental psychology have proven that rules and boundaries are essential for young people’s emotional security and development.

So here are 3 tips for assessing your rules as a parent or educator:

1. Prioritize the relationship

While boundaries and rules do matter, the relationship must always come first. As my colleague Dr Robi Sonderegger says “*Rules without relationship will lead to resentment and rebellion; but rules with relationship will lead to respect.*”

2. Major on the majors

Whether it is the age-old generational war over clean bedrooms, towels hung neatly on the rail, body piercings, music choice and volume or tidy haircuts, I urge you to choose the battles you engage in carefully and bite your tongue when issues are ones of preference and little more.

Naturally of course some boundaries are worth enforcing and some battles are necessary to fight. When it comes to personal safety and significant life choices, there will be times when you need to 'put your foot down'. However, just like the boy who cried wolf, you may have eroded your credibility and authority to enforce these important boundaries if you have consistently overreacted to every small and insignificant misdemeanour along the way.



3. Maintain perspective

While the principle of 'picking your battles' is not new, it is one that many parents and educators find difficult to keep front-of-mind when emotions come into play. In the heat of the moment where offense has been caused, irritation is persistent and decisions of poor judgment have been made, it is sometimes difficult to know when to hold and when to fold; when to speak up and when to remain silent.

A helpful way to maintain perspective is an approach called the 20-year test. Put simply, next time a young person breaks one of your rules or fails to meet your expectations, ask yourself whether the present argument, altercation or breach of behaviour will even matter in 20 years' time? Furthermore, what are the chances that you will be able to remember it that far down the track?

Getting perspective is the most effective way to determine the rules and expectations that are worth enforcing. I love the story American baseball legend Harmon Killebrew tells about when his father used to play with him and his brother in the backyard. In response to his mother's protest of, 'You're tearing up the grass', Harmon's father would respond, 'We're not raising grass, we're raising boys.'

Parents and teachers, can I encourage you to think twice next time you are tempted to fly off the handle in reaction to the small (or even large) things that your children and students do that irritate, disappoint or upset you. I urge you to be humble and honest enough to ask yourself if it is possible that your frustrations are more a result of your own personal rules and expectations.

You may well find that it is the arguments, debates and shouting matches you avoid that will make all the difference in allowing an engaging relationship to truly flourish.



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