

WHO RULES YOUR LIVING ROOM?

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I was working on some research on blended families and I came across the following issue from a frustrated stepmother.

“I am having a hard time as a stepparent because when my husband’s nine- year-old daughter stays with us, she takes over the living room TV, and I have to put up with six-hour stretches of cartoons. The room is trashed and John says Jane cannot be asked to tidy up after herself or be responsible in any way. This has gone on for years.”

Whether a stepfamily or not, the principles for happy home living should be the same. There are a number of possibilities as to why parents won’t insist their children respect the home or pick up their stuff. In the case of second marriages there is often a feeling of guilt by the biological parent over the first marriage break-up and they try to appease their kids by laying no responsibility on them at all. Discipline is difficult, and many parents just don’t want the hassle of arguments with their kids. As for arguing over TV programs, at least it is keeping the kids entertained!

This type of relationship is often called a ‘sugar daddy’ deal. “When you are with me I will let you do what you want so that you will like me more than your mother/father.” This attitude is totally unfair to the other parent and usually leads to the ‘sugar daddy’ being disrespected. What it definitely does is make the child feel as if they are the center of the universe and they get very upset if they are ever asked to do anything. If you want to raise a narcissistic child this is the best way to do it. It’s called ruining a child. Is this the way to treat a child in the blended family situation? The stepparent is to be subservient to the other spouse’s child? This expectation is going to send the deck of cards crashing. While stepparents have to use caution in dealing with the other spouse’s child in the blending period, the scenario above is untenable.

So who owns your living room? Who should decide how the living room is used and what TV programs should be on – or off? Who is in charge – the parents or the kids? If there are no clear rules for family living, then your kids will make up their own. Since the adult is paying the bills he/she has the final say as to what happens in the living room. There should be time for play without TV on and time limits for watching particular programs by kids. Other times, parents should be able to enjoy their own time in the living room. Remember, you set the rules.

Trashing the house is being totally disrespectful to everyone who lives there. To allow a child to throw their stuff anywhere and not pick it up later is not teaching them the discipline they require to make it successfully through the rest of their lives.

Allowing children to do anything they please as a means of softening the hurt of family break up does not help them at all. What the children want is to feel secure again. They need boundaries, explanations, expectations and consequences so they know they are loved and cared for. Giving them responsibility around the home gives them a sense of belonging. Teaching them to share TV time, playtime and chores creates a bond that is very much needed in our ever-fragmented society.

Make your living room a place of rest, inspiration, fun and shared family conversation.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.