What to say when your eleven-year-old argues every rule

"My eleven-year-old argues every rule into the ground: "Why do I have to be home by six? That's so unfair." How do I hold it without a war?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Because I said so. And if you keep arguing, it's five o'clock."

"Because I said so" ends the argument tonight and makes the rule feel arbitrary, which is exactly what an eleven-year-old is arguing against.

What the research says

A 2017 meta-analysis pooled 1,435 studies of children and adolescents. Parental warmth, behavioural control (clear rules and follow-through) and autonomy granting, and the authoritative style that combines them, were each linked with fewer behaviour problems, though the links were very small to small. Harsh control and psychological control, such as guilt, shaming or withdrawing affection, were linked with more problems, and were the strongest links in the analysis. Authoritarian, permissive and neglectful styles were linked with more problems too.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I hear you. It feels unfair when your friends stay out later. On school nights it's home by six, because I need to know you're safe. We'll look at it again together when you're twelve."

That is why "strict or soft" is the wrong question. The research separates two kinds of control: clear rules, which go with fewer problems, and pressure through guilt or fear, which goes with more. Diana Baumrind's original description of authoritative parents included giving reasons for rules.

The American Academy of Pediatrics adds the practical half: explain rules in age-appropriate terms and keep them consistent.

What the words do

"I hear you" and "it feels unfair" take his complaint seriously. The reason is real and said once. The rule doesn't move tonight. "We'll look at it again when you're twelve" tells him the rule is about his age and safety, not your mood, and gives the argument somewhere to go other than now.

If you live in two homes

Two homes often hold rules differently, and a child will sometimes use that: "Dad lets me." You don't have to win the comparison or criticise the other home. "That may be how it works at Dad's. In this house, the rule is the rule, and I'll tell you why." If a rule matters for safety, try to agree it with the other parent directly, not through your child.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.