



## Love, Limits and Lessons: Teach your kids more by doing less

By Bill Corbett, Special to Valley Kids

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One day in 1994, my 9-year-old daughter called me at my office to tell me that she had left her lunch money at home again and needed me to bring it to her. This typical forgetfulness by my children was quite annoying but something I thought I was supposed to resolve as a father. On my ride to the school, I couldn't help but think about the inconvenience. More importantly, I suddenly became concerned about how irresponsible my daughter would eventually be as an adult if I was constantly remembering for her or rescuing her.

That evening, I gathered my three children for an impromptu family meeting to discuss a few changes that would take effect immediately. I announced that from now on, they were solely responsible for remembering to bring with them any items they needed for school that day -- lunch money, homework, and school projects. I advised them that unless it was required for health and safety reasons, I was no longer willing to run home and retrieve what they left behind. My responsibility as a dad teaching his children about limits required me to draw a personal boundary. During that meeting, I also took the time to help them come up with ideas that would enable and empower them to remember on their own.

For the next few weeks, my plan worked and the kids were so proud of themselves with their new sense of responsibility -- until one day, my 9-year-old daughter called the office. Expressing worry and distress, she told me she had left a book report poster due that day on the dining room table. She described to me how much time and effort she had spent working on it the night before. She then confirmed that she was aware of my new "dad rule" about leaving things at home, but pleaded with me to bring it to her or she would receive a bad grade on the assignment. She promised that this would be the last time that she would ever call me for anything like this.

My initial feeling at that moment was that I could go and get it for her, "just this one time," because I loved her so much and didn't want her to fail. But I knew that doing so would violate my boundary and teach her that limits are set to be broken.

One of the hardest moments while raising our kids was my decision to tell her that I was abiding by the new family rule, and I was unwilling to retrieve the poster. I wished her a good day, hung up the phone, and cried in my office. As it turned out, the teacher agreed to give her partial credit for the assignment if she brought it in the very next day; my daughter remembered for herself from that moment on.

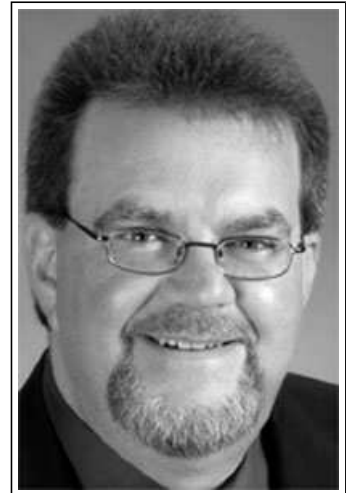
Shortly after that incident, I decided they were ready for more responsibility so a new rule was set up; I would give the children their lunch money on Sunday nights for the week. They were now responsible for paying for their lunch each day. For some reason, our particular school system would not accept lunch payment in advance for the week so this created a unique challenge.

In our discussion about the new rule, I decided that if they lost their lunch money, I would not replace it, and they would have to bring something from home to eat that day -- consisting only of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, crackers with peanut butter, or fruit if available.

The point was that if they lost their lunch money, it would not be my requirement to prepare something for them to eat; that was their responsibility. I was also unwilling to be responsible for purchasing any special foods or making anything. They could bring a lunch that they could make on their own -- something that I approved. I do know that some parents thought I was a mean father for taking this approach, but my goal was to develop responsible and capable children.

One evening at home, my son entered the kitchen dragging a dining room chair over to the counter. We had a few adult friends visiting and he excused himself to clear a path as the adults moved out of this way. He stepped up on the chair and opened the cupboard, taking down a box of crackers and a jar of peanut butter. One of the visitors asked him what he was doing. Without any hesitation, he told them that he had lost his lunch money and was making his lunch for the next day. I got some very strange, judgmental looks. But I had made the decision long ago that I was not in this world to please others or live by their standards. I was a father and I was taking my role very seriously.

Today I'm enjoying watching that same little boy as an adult, planning ahead, setting clear boundaries for himself and others, and making wise decisions.



Bill Corbett: Love, Limits and Lessons

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Raising cooperative and responsible children requires teaching them about clear, respectful limits and boundaries. It helps them to become self-sufficient and teaches them personal responsibility. As parents, we love our children dearly, but with our busy schedules and the limited time we have to spend with them, we've become convinced that we need to do more for them, rather than teaching them about limits in advance. And once limits are set up, we have to remember that because our children are wired to explore, they will test those limits.

Refrain from punishing your children when they test your boundaries, and remain calm. Realize that if you've done everything for them in the past and have decided to suddenly make changes, their normal reaction may be to push your boundaries even more. Our children want to know "who's flying the plane"; it's up to us to show them we're the pilot and in charge!

Bill Corbett is the author of the book "Love, Limits, & Lessons," and the executive director of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site [www.CooperativeKids.com](http://www.CooperativeKids.com) for further information and parenting advice.

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