**Learning Social Rules**

[Home](http://autismdigest.com)  /  [Blog](http://autismdigest.com/category/blog/)  /  Current Page

**Learning Social Rules**  
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Children and adults on the autism spectrum are concrete, literal thinkers. Ideas that can’t be understood through logic or that involve emotions and social relationships are difficult for us to grasp, and even more difficult to incorporate into our daily lives. When I was in high school, figuring out the ‘social rules’ was a major challenge. It was not easy to notice similarities in peoples’ social actions and responses because they were often inconsistent from person to person and situation to situation. Over time, I observed that some rules could be broken with minor consequences and other rules, when broken, had serious consequences. It perplexed me that other kids seemed to know which rules they could bend and break and which rules must never be broken. They had a flexibility of thinking that I did not have.

I knew I had to learn these rules if I wanted to function in social situations. If I had to learn them, they somehow had to be meaningful to me, to make sense to me within my own way of thinking and viewing the world. I started observing like a scientist and discovered I could group the rules into an organizational format to which I could relate: into major and minor categories. By the time I was a senior in high school I had a system for categorizing some of the social rules of life. I still use the same system today.

I developed four rule categories: 1) Really Bad Things; 2) Courtesy Rules; 3) Illegal But Not Bad; and 4) Sins of the System.

**Really Bad Things**. I reasoned that in order to maintain a civilized society, there must be prohibitions against doing really bad things such as murder, arson, rape, stealing, looting and injuring other people. If really bad things are not controlled, a civilized society where we have jobs, food in the stores and electricity cannot exist. The prohibition against really bad things is universal in all civilized societies. Children need to be taught that cheating – in all forms, not just on tests – is bad. Learning to “play fair” will help a child grow into an adult who will not commit really bad things.

**Courtesy Rules**. All civilized societies have courtesy rules, such as saying “please” and “thank you.” These rules are important because they help prevent anger that can escalate into really bad things. Different societies have different courtesy rules, but they all serve the same function. In most countries, some common courtesy rules are: standing and waiting your turn in a line, good table manners, being neat and clean, giving up your seat on a bus to an elderly person, or raising your hand and waiting for the teacher to point to you before speaking in class.

**Illegal But Not Bad**. These rules can sometimes be broken depending upon the circumstance. Rules in this category vary greatly from one society to another and how an individual views these rules will be influenced by his or her own set of moral and personal beliefs. Be careful though: consequences for breaking some are minor; for others, there may be a fine. Included in this category are slight speeding in cars, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. One rule I often recommend breaking is the age requirement for attending a community college. I tell parents to sign up the child so he can escape being teased in high school. However, the parent must impress upon the child that this is a grown-up privilege and he must obey all the courtesy rules. An example of a rule that would not fall in this category would be running a red light. Doing this carries the possibility of injuring or killing someone, which is a “Really Bad Thing.”

**Sins of the System.** These are rules that must never be broken, although they may seem to have little or no basis in logic. They must simply be accepted within our country and our culture. For instance, a small sexual transgression that would result in your name being added to a sex-offender list in theU.S. may have little or no consequence in another country. In theU.S. the two major sins of the system are sexual transgressions and drug offenses. Never commit a “sin of the system” because the penalties are usually very severe.

This method of categorizing social rules has worked well for me. However, each person with autism may need different rule categories that make sense for him or her.