

Systems Approach to Parenting

A while ago someone told me that there were really only two vectors or levers that you could use to parent - structure and empathy. At around the same time, I was listening to an interesting podcast that was aiming to help me improve myself. The memorable construct from that was that there are two types of “rules” out there - rules of propriety and rules that can be derived.

I thought that these two frameworks really complemented each other and found them to be super helpful in how I thought about interacting with my children. Unfortunately, I was a perfectionist at one point in my life and that makes some aspects of parenting pretty difficult. It is difficult because I am still search for that 80 / 20 balance when it comes to communicating rules and seeing them followed. I ran this frustration and these frameworks by a friend recently (who is the most agreeable person I have ever met - NOT a perfectionist) and he felt like I had described something special.

“As a parent, there are only two levers at your disposal - empathy and structure”

The first construct was lent to me by a close collaborator in life as I was describing my frustrations around parenting. I am not sure he realized how important it would become to me, but it has become a major heuristic for me as a parent, a husband, and (as of late) a human being. Let me describe how this helps me. If I find myself getting frustrated with my child around a behavior, I now have a CHOICE that applies to all situations and gets my frontal cortex all hot and bothered. Say my daughter is tantruming about not being able to watch TV and I am getting frustrated by this behavior. I now have a choice - do I want to impart structure “this is a RULE” or do I want to be empathetic “tell me why you feel this way?”. This was awesome but it wasn’t enough. I have no idea how do decide which rabbit hole to go down. I don’t even know if these decisions are mutually exclusive or not!

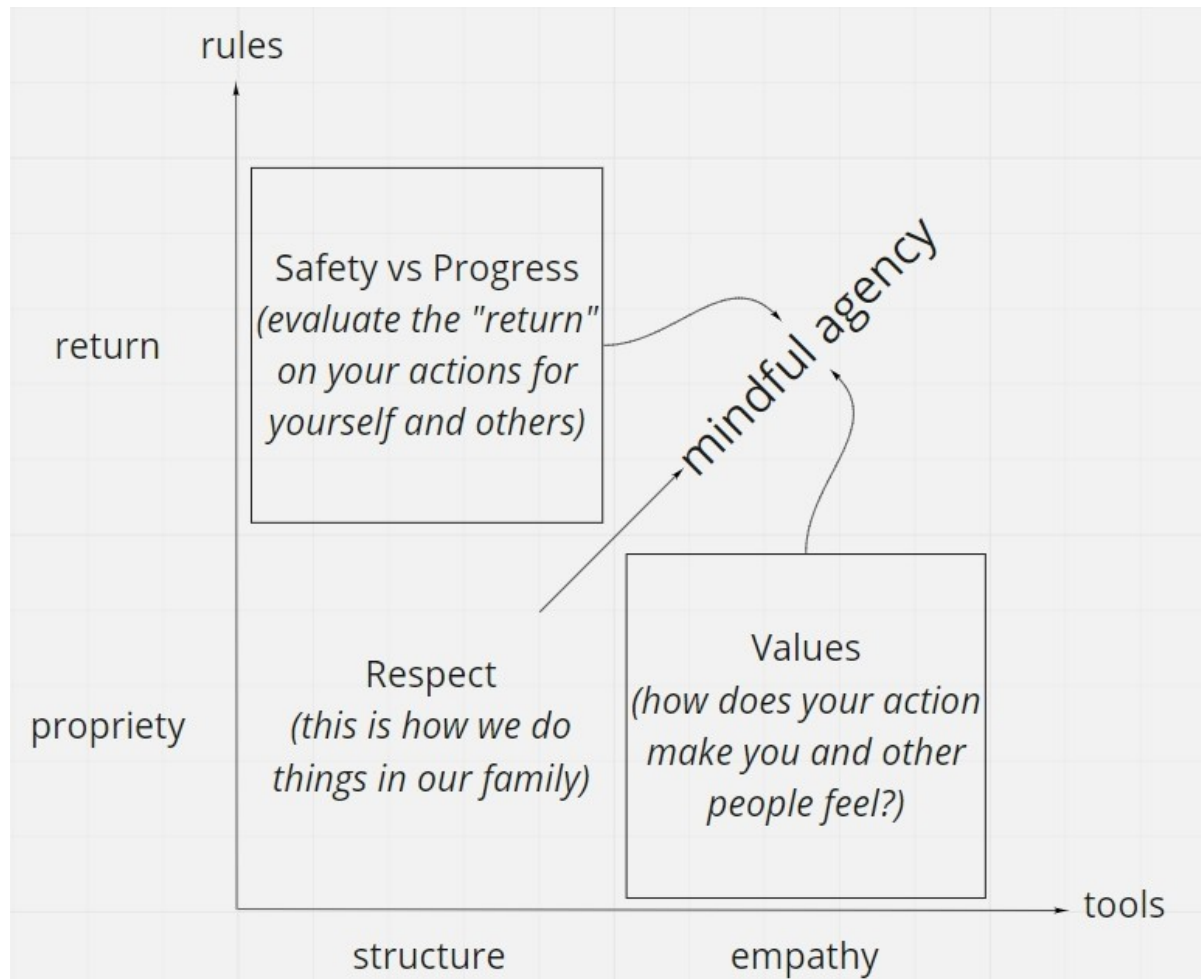
Thinking through Rules → Propriety vs. Return

That is where the next framework around “rules” became super helpful. Truth be told, I don’t remember which podcast it was, but I thought it was powerful and helpful. There are two types of rules - propriety and return. Rules of propriety exist in a vacuum. There may be some fun story historically about why they exist, but that logic doesn’t apply today and probably won’t apply ever again. For instance, why is the bread plate on the left and your drink cup on the right? In a South Asian household, why don’t we wear shoes inside?

The other type of rule is not meant to be a rule at all. Its mindfulness of consequences of ones actions around the emotional consequences on them and others as well as the physical consequences (getting hurt or feeling pain). If I am jumping on the couch and fall onto the hard floor, there will be physical consequences (pain and potentially broken bones). Ultimately, how do I evaluate the risk reward of my actions.

Putting it all together

I wanted to take a stab at putting both of these continuums together to understand whether it could help me as a parent, so I proceeded to put the chart below together to see where it lead me.



So there was something that really hit me about this because the output is something that I believe is an aspirational quality for an adult. The realization that I have made as an adult is that when I feel strongest, I have a strong internal locus of control. In that state, all the rules and habits are ones that I believe and feel like I have decided whether to carry or put down. This is how I think about “mindful agency” and this is what I wish for for my children.

What this structure gives me is a well defined structure to parent. It enables me to (amidst emotional duress) choose a tool and a message based on a very simple heuristic.