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Lessons from the Childrearing Trenches

Just Say “No” to Threats Part 2: What to do when your child is the one using intimidation

In the last newsletter, I wrote about avoiding the use of threats to get kids to cooperate or to stop misbehaving. But what about when your child is the one doing the intimidating to get her way, as illustrated in these recent stories parents have shared?

After being told she can't go ice-skating with a friend because Aunt Jackie is coming over for a visit, Layla (6) announces that she is going to open up her window (in her bedroom on the second floor) and then run out the front door so when her parents can't find her, they'll think she fell out of the window.

Marcus (3) threatens not to eat for the rest of the day if his dad won't give him a snack-bar for breakfast.

Sorrah (4) exclaims that she won't let the babysitter in the house and will “get her dead” if mommy goes out to meet her friends for dinner.

These kinds of provocative proclamations, while not uncommon, are naturally very disturbing to parents who take them at face value and worry that they are raising a sociopath. With this mindset, it is understandable that parents' knee-jerk reaction is to get harsh and punitive to teach their child a lesson and to shut down these kinds of threats. But this backfires almost every time, as any big parental reaction is a victory for the child and reinforces the power and validity of the irrational proclamation. When efforts to yank their parents' chain work, the behavior is proven effective.

But children don't mean what they say when they are in "red zone". (Even most of us adults can recall a time or two when we said horrible things to those we loved when we were angry or hurt.) In these moments, children are using inflammatory language because they are desperate to get their point across. They also know these alarming threats often get a rise out of parents, which is their goal.

What to do instead? *Ignore the provocation, but don't ignore your child.*

This means not mentioning a word about the actual threat and instead acknowledging the underlying feeling that is driving it. The more children's feelings are validated, the more they learn to understand and manage their emotions which reduces the need to act them out. Then you move on to show your child that you are not going to continue to engage in an unhealthy interaction and that you won't validate irrational thinking. But you are happy to engage with her in a more productive, positive endeavor. This approach is what truly teaches children the lesson that inflammatory language and threats are not an effective strategy for getting their way.

Layla, we know you are very disappointed you can't go skating. We totally understand that it is hard to miss out on a fun activity and that you are mad at us

for not letting you go. We don't expect you to like our decision. Now, I am going to cut up some fruit to serve Aunt Jackie. I would love a helper when you're ready.

Marcus, I know how you love snack-bars and are mad I won't give you one. When you're ready to choose cereal or fruit, let me know.

Soriah, you don't like it when mommy goes out. I understand. But it's important for me to see my friends. If you want, you can choose a book for us to read before I go.

Of course, this doesn't mean your child will get with the program and move on right away. But if you can stay the course in the face of her persistence, once she sees you aren't taking the bait and are not budging, she will adapt.