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Lessons From the Trenches

Just Say "No" To Threats!

"If you don't stay in your room and get to sleep, I am going to put a gate up!"

"If you don't put all these toys away, I am throwing them in the trash." Most parents have resorted to threats like these in a desperate attempt to get their kids to cooperate.

But this tactic often backfires because children pick up on the negativity and react to it.

It sends the message to your child that you are already anticipating that she isn't going to comply and that you're in for a fight. This puts kids in oppositional, power-struggle mode, especially children who are more defiant by nature. Negativity and threats tend to amplify their resistance and they just dig in their heels more firmly. (Not to mention that most of the time parents have no intention of following through on the threat and the child knows it.)

Instead, practice using a positive tone and approach when giving your child a direction.

It can make a big difference because it puts children in a more cooperative state of mind. Today's newsletter offers a few strategies for getting your child to say "Yes!" way more than "NO!"

Offer "two great choices": "Tania, it's so awesome--you have two great choices! After lights-out, if you choose to stay in your room, your door can stay open. If you choose to come out of your room, we will be helpers and escort you back to bed. Then we'll put up our friend Mr. Gate or [Mrs. Monkey Lock](#) who will help you stay in your room so you can get yourself to sleep. You get to decide which choice you want to make." Versus: "Tania, if you come out of your room after lights out the gate is going up!" (When I told a friend recently about this approach, he responded, "Oh yeah, I did that all the time with my kids. I called it the "choice of no choices"!)

Another example: "Brandon, you've got two great choices: if you choose to cooperate with tooth-brushing, we will have time for an extra book before bedtime; if you choose not to cooperate, I will need to brush your teeth which means we won't have time for the bonus book. You decide." Versus: "Brandon, if you don't brush your teeth, there won't be any books tonight!"

When you end your presentation of choices with the positive phrase, "you decide", it reinforces the idea that you are not the one making the choice—your child is. You are just implementing the consequences of his decisions. When children feel forced to do something, the impulse is to refuse to comply as a way to maintain some sense of agency or integrity. And remember--***you can't control your children or make them do anything***—and they know it. What you can control is the situation by setting clear boundaries and limits that you are able to implement.

That is what guides and shapes children's behavior. If your child makes a good choice, it results in a positive outcome for her. A poor choice leads to a less-desired outcome.

Direct, don't correct: Children—especially highly sensitive, reactive children—tend to feel shamed and overwhelmed when being corrected. When they hear “no!” their brains become flooded with emotion and they are unable to think or problem-solve. This makes it much less likely they will comply and change their behavior in positive ways.

Instead, skip the “no” and go straight to what the expectation is—what they *can* do. For example, if a child gets up from the table before mealtime is over, instead of saying, “No getting up to from table. Sit back down right now or there will be no more food,” you might say: “Oh, we’re still sitting at the table” (as you tap his chair to provide a visual cue). Or, if a child goes for a toy when you’ve told her it’s time to get pjs on, you might respond: “We’re putting on pajamas now” (as you gently steer her away from the book and towards the task); versus, “If you don’t get your pajamas on right now there will be no books.” Last week at a preschool, there was a three-year-old who was desperate to push...anything, including friends. It was clear he wasn't doing this on purpose to be hurtful. His body just craved this sensory experience. I said to him: “Henry, you love to push. It feels so good to your body. Let's see how hard you can push against this wall.” He immediately got into this activity and some of the other kids joined in. Then we made it a game. I showed them how to push themselves away from the wall and clap, to add a new dimension.

An important feature of this approach is that it requires a lot less language than we tend to use when we are frustrated and trying to get our children to cooperate. We launch into a lecture thinking we can convince our children to do the right thing, but this tends to have the opposite effect. When a limit is being set it's stressful for

kids—they have to stop doing something they enjoy in order to comply with someone else’s agenda. The more we talk, the more agitated and overstimulated children become, which escalates their frustration and interferes with their ability to regulate themselves and comply. This strategy also helps *you* self-regulate—all that lecturing tends to increase parents’ emotional intensity. Providing a clear direction is simpler, keeps everybody calmer, and makes you a more effective limit-setter.

First/Then: This strategy lets children know that there will be a time when they will be able to have or do what they want in the near future which can engender more cooperation. For example, Jason is headed for the basket of balls before he has put away his other toys. Using “First, Then”, his dad says, “Oh, do you want to play with the balls? Great idea! First we need to clean up these toys and then we can play with the balls.” Another example: "Ruby, you are thinking a lot about how much you want to go to the playground. First nap and then we're off to the park!" When you acknowledge and validate your child’s desire and confirm that she will be able to do what she wants to do eventually, you reduce the stress she typically experiences when she can’t get what she wants right away. This calms her and puts her in a more positive frame of mind, which makes her more willing to cooperate

I hope these suggestions help! If you have strategies you have found effective for engaging your child's cooperation, please send them along so I can share them in future newsletters.

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