

How To Stop Saying No

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You're as tired of the word as your kids are of hearing it. Follow a parenting expert's strategies for getting kids to behave by saying "yes" more often. Then sit back and enjoy the positive results.

At the end of a busy weekend of soccer practice, birthday parties, and grocery shopping, we have family friends over for dinner. The kids are, simply put, crazy: running around, pulling toys out of every basket, and jumping from couch to chair and back again. My three daughters come to me every two minutes with a different request. "No," I say, barely listening.

But then my 8-year-old makes a statement that does catch my attention. "My mom says 'no' all the time," she tells her pal. Hearing my daughter describe me as a 24/7 "no" mom was surprising—and hurtful. I have to admit I do resort to the reflexive no, particularly during stressful times of day, like the morning rush to get my oldest out the door for school and the evening crunch around bedtime. Still, I don't want my girls to think I'm not listening or considering their needs and requests. I want them to know they have a voice, a say in our family.

So in an attempt to address my "no-ness," I decided to reach out to Amy McCready, the founder of PositiveParentingSolutions.com, a training program for parents, and the author of *The "Me, Me, Me" Epidemic: A Step by-Step Guide to Raising Capable, Grateful Kids in an Over-Entitled World*.

When we spoke, I explained that I have good, generally well-behaved girls: Talia, age 8, Sofie, 5, and Sasha, 2. I'm not struggling with any major issues with my kids, just the normal everyday stuff. Still, I confess that sometimes I can't handle all their requests and saying "no" works. "Simply saying 'no' or barking orders about what kids should be doing can be expedient in the moment," McCready says. "However, it doesn't foster their sense of capability or independence and can make the situation ripe for power struggles." If I want to achieve the goal of being more positive, I'd have to give more power and responsibility over to my daughters.

Positive discipline doesn't mean that kids always get their way or that you say "yes" to everything. McCready explains, "It means giving kids opportunities to have some age-appropriate control over their own world, within the firm and loving boundaries you feel comfortable with."

Sounds good, but how? McCready offered me three key strategies to use when I struggle with "no" most.

1. instead of "no," say...

"You're really growing up! From now on, I'm going to let you be responsible for certain things."

Talia's school bus comes at 7:20 a.m., which is just too early for our family. I was always thankful my children didn't rise with the sun, but the flip side is that getting Talia motivated in the morning is difficult. I'm badgering her from the minute I wake her to the moment she's out the door: to get dressed, eat, put on her shoes. Anything she requests is met with a swift negative—I barely even have time to talk to her, as I'm so busy just trying to get her ready.

However, according to McCready, children as young as 4 or 5 can learn to get up on their own and manage their morning routine, with a little pregame planning with your help (for example, setting an alarm clock with her, and putting cups, bowls, and cereal in a low cabinet where she can reach them in the morning). Talia is 8 1/2, and I'm still waking her. "Right now, the morning is your problem," McCready explains. "You need to make it Talia's problem by turning over the responsibility."

McCready believes we don't give our kids enough legitimate control over their own lives. Parents spend so much time ordering, correcting, and fixing, that children don't feel in control. They need to feel empowered by making their own choices.

McCready suggests we get Talia a digital watch with a multiple-alarm setting (an alarm clock or iPod can do the job too) and let Talia decide what time she wants to get up. She's to set three alarms: one to wake, one to be dressed and downstairs, and a final alarm to be out the door. At McCready's urging, I present our new routine to Talia in a positive light, as a privilege she's earned. "You're old enough to get yourself up, dressed, and downstairs," I tell Talia. "You've proven to me how responsible you can be, so we're going to get you your own special watch. Now, you're in charge of your

morning." Talia beams with pride and excitement. Over the weekend, together we buy the watch and write out her new schedule.

On Monday morning, to my astonishment, Talia wakes up on her own, dresses herself, eats her breakfast, gets her things together, and is out the door—all on time. Because she's responsible for making it all happen, it does—and we even have time to chat. The morning, like the others that follow, is peaceful, pleasant, and organized. It's amazing that such an easy fix created such a dramatic positive change. Now, instead of my nudging Talia through the morning routine, the alarm reminds her when to get ready—and she takes pride in feeling so capable.

And McCready points out that the alarm system can be used for other issues too: bedtime, homework, making difficult transitions, and more.

2. Instead of "no," say...

"When you finish X, you may enjoy Y."

As is the case in every household I know with kids, no two weekdays look the same. But every day—at some point—I allow my girls to watch one TV show. It's the "some point" that's causing the problem. My Kindergartner, Sofie, has difficulty figuring out when she's going to be allowed her precious TV time. Every day, the minute we walk into the house—whether it's 2 p.m. or 5:30 p.m.—she wants to know "When can I watch TV?" And I can't stand the daily barrage of begging, whining, and pleading that inevitably leads me to say "no" over and over again.

McCready suggests I institute a "when/then" strategy: When all the "must do" activities are finished (homework, instrument practice, cleanup), then

Sofie can have TV time. Because Sofie's TV time also depends in part on her siblings' commitments, I lay out the full schedule for the day for her. "Talia has theater today, so when we get home from dropping her off, you and Sasha need to clean up the playroom, and then—yes—you can have a TV show." Once Sofie has the information for the day, she doesn't feel insecure about whether TV is going to happen or not. She's no longer constantly checking in with me because she now knows exactly what needs to happen, and I find I'm saying "yes" a lot more. I'm successfully using when/then at

other tricky times of day, too, like bedtime (when you brush your teeth, then we can read books until lights-out) and mealtime (when the dinner plates are cleared, then we'll serve dessert).

3. Instead of "no," say...

"Let's talk about it."

Third grade is an exciting time at our school: Kids are allowed to walk home alone. When Talia first asked me if she could, my gut said "no." I was overwhelmed by the risks: School is more than a mile away, there are two busy intersections, what if she gets lost or hurt, what if a stranger approaches her? It felt much easier to keep her safe and close. But instead of giving in to my primal maternal instinct, I followed McCready's advice and said, "Hmm, let's talk about that." McCready provided me with three keyquestions to ask.

One: "Why is that important to you?" (Talia explained that everyone who walks says it's fun, and she wanted some freedom).

Two: "If I say 'yes' to your request, what are some important things that you need to remember to do?" (We sat down together with a map, going over the route and pointing out crossing guards and sidewalks).

Three: "What can I do to help you be most successful?" (Talia's answer was simple: "Trust me.") Once you know your child has covered all the bases, McCready instructs, express confidence in her and let it happen.

On the first day my husband and I allowed Talia to walk home alone, I admit that I hid behind a tree in my yard until I saw her round the corner. Relieved, I ran inside so she wouldn't catch me spying and gave her a hug when she proudly walked through the door. Though I mourned the loss of a piece of her childhood, I knew I'd made the right decision.

McCready suggests saving the "re-frame" for the important requests. "Sometimes we don't have the time or luxury to consider every request and have to say 'no.' But it's crucial to let your kids know that you're taking their needs and desires into account and really considering them." Then they, too, are more likely to feel they're being heard.