

Say What You Mean! Talking Straight to Children



Sometimes we want to make things go smoothly with our preschoolers—so smoothly that we shy away from telling them clearly what we really mean.

Keep things simple.

Children don't have to like everything that we ask of them. You won't hurt your child by saying what behavior you want, if you are calm, brief, friendly, and straightforward. Do you want your preschooler to stop jumping out of her chair at meal times? Say something like "I want you to sit still" instead of "You need to sit still." After all, she may not really "need" to sit still right at that moment! But you want her to finish breakfast quietly so she can be ready for the next activity of the day.

Express your understanding of how hard it might be for your child to do what you want.

When you insist on behaviors such as sitting still or not touching things, it can help to let your child know that you understand that what you are asking is hard. You can use a friendly but firm tone: "I know you would rather run around." "I can see why it might be fun to touch all Grandma's little flower pots. But they break very easily, so I don't want you to do that."

State clearly what behavior you want and then move on.

Once you've said what you want in a pleasant, clear, and firm tone, change the subject. Later, when the crisis has passed, you might explain in detail why the behavior you asked for was so important. But young children are best served by short and direct indications of what behavior their close adults want. They often "tune out" long explanations.

It is never necessary to be nasty or mean, but it is necessary to be firm.

During their preschool years, most children want to be the kind of people we want them to be, but they often need help learning how to do it. We don't have to be critical, sarcastic, or angry when we insist on the behavior we want. But we do have to be firm and clear. Resist the temptation to promise rewards if the child follows your requests; she should comply because you are responsible for her well-being.

For related Web resources, see "Say What You Mean! Talking Straight to Children" at <https://illinoisearlylearning.org/tipsheets/>

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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