

The Importance of No

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By [Deeanna Franklin-Campbell](#)



The word "no" figures in countless conversations between parents and children. Should every sentence start with the dreaded word, or are there alternate ways of getting the message across?

Any parent of a young child knows that you start off more than a few conversations with the word "No."

As far as your little one is concerned he's just trying to get to know his world. But as far as you're concerned, your child is secretly trying to give you a nervous breakdown.

"No, you can't put Dad's sneaker in your mouth." Or "No, you can't eat that pencil." Or "No, I don't care what Grandma said, you can't be carried everywhere, sometimes your feet will have to touch the ground." Or my personal favorite: "No! Stop that! The cat does not want to wrestle."

Safety First

According to pediatrician Dr. Wil Wilkoff, author of *How to Say No to Your Toddler*, the most important thing parents can do when it comes to disciplining their toddler is to put their child's safety first. "It boils down to a safety issue. If you only need one reason to learn to tell your toddler 'no' effectively, it's to keep your child safe," he says.

Having said that, if a parent starts and ends every conversation with their toddler by saying "No," the word may start to lose its weight. After a while it becomes clear that it's best to pick the battles. Dr. Wilkoff suggests that parents write down the behaviors that are most troubling to them and prioritize the worst ones. "The most unsafe behavior should top the list, followed by the behaviors that you find the most disturbing."

Be Creative

There are also positive ways to get your point across without becoming Mommy-the-Tyrant. One way to balance the negative is by creative alternatives. Instead of constantly saying "No", offer your toddler a choice. Try a simple tactic, like offering to trade him a ball for the TV remote control, to using more elaborate alternatives such as telling your little one that she has a real sense of style, then dubbing her the family's Chief Sock-Wrangler. This job entails helping you round up all the matching socks as the laundry comes out of the dryer. Make sure to applaud a job well done. This is a tried and true tactic used by public relations professionals everywhere, and epitomized by Tom Sawyer, when he convinced his friends to paint his aunt's fence for him. It's the rare toddler who's up on Mark Twain, so you're probably safe with this tactic.

Stop signs and stop-sound signals can also help enormously, as many parents unwittingly master the no-look and the no-voice signals. Children pick up on their parents' body language fairly quickly, and using a certain look that immediately conveys, "Stop" can be an invaluable tool for a parent. Also being able to tailor the intensity and tone of your voice to convey "No" without directly saying the word is a handy skill. Your child will soon learn which words carry more weight and power, and you'll obtain a faster response.

Many children may respond better to "Stop" than to "No." That is often the case with younger children. An older toddler may find it fun to hear you say, "Freeze" when you want him to stop, and that's fine, as long as he also understands that you actually do want him to stop whatever he was doing or was about to do.

However you choose to discipline your child, always be cognizant that your goal is to stop a specific behavior, not to stunt a child's natural curiosity. Try to convey that you disapprove of the action, not of the child. It is crucial for parents to learn to discipline without damaging a child's feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry maintains that it's important to have logical consequences for misbehavior, as it helps children learn that they are accountable for their actions, without damaging their self-esteem.

The Academy offers these tips for effective discipline:

- Speak to your child as *you* would want to be spoken to if someone were reprimanding you.
- Model positive behavior. "Do as I say, not as I do" seldom works.
- Be clear about what you mean. Be firm and specific.
- Make sure that what you ask for is reasonable, given the child's age and stage of development.
- Whenever possible, consequences should be delivered immediately, should relate to the rule broken, and should be short enough in duration that you can move on again to emphasize the positives.
- It may seem time-worn, but time-outs work. "Time-out is the most effective and safest punishment to use with a toddler and it makes the most sense," says Dr. Wilkoff.

Rest is Key

Dr. Wilkoff also reminds parents that well-rested children are better-behaved children, and that the secret to more attentiveness and fewer tantrums may lie with more sleep. If you're continually faced with a defiant, naughty toddler, you may be dealing with a child who needs a nap or an earlier bedtime. Children under six years of age should get a cumulative total of 12-13 hours of sleep within a 24-hour period. Ideally, that would look like a 7 p.m. bedtime, with a 7 a.m. wake-up time, and a 30-60 minute nap after lunch. Tired children are also the most accident-prone.

Another overlooked but no less important part of having a well-behaved child is making sure *you* get enough sleep. While most parents just assume that lack of sleep comes with the territory when raising a toddler, the fact is that a well-rested parent is less likely to snap or lash out at a misbehaving child and more likely to be patient and consistent with his or her discipline style. Consistency is key. It reduces resistance and testing behaviors. It will also cut down on the amount of time it takes a toddler to learn new rules.

Dr. Wilkoff believes that the commitment to safety, follow-through, and communication that you establish now with your toddler will reverberate well into his teen years. Which brings up another great resource for parents who genuinely feel at their wits' end in dealing with a defiant toddler: consult the family practitioner or pediatrician. These physicians are often well-versed in child behavioral issues and can offer expert advice and suggestions on how to handle a toddler who won't take "No" for an answer.