

Three Powerful Practices for Guiding Children's Behavior

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Your child and their teachers work hard to develop a variety of social and emotional skills, like self-regulation and cooperation. What are some strategies you might try at home? Here are a few to consider using. Remember that young children are developing a sense of autonomy and will sometimes say “no” to assert their independence. However, using these three strategies over time will encourage cooperation and begin to reduce the number of “no’s” that you hear.

- 1. Tell children what to do (versus what not to do).** When they hear “no,” “stop,” or only what *not* to do (“Don’t run!”), children are left without some key information: What is the right thing to be doing, and why? Also, they may just hear and focus on the very action you’re asking them not to do (“run”) and keep doing it. It’s much more effective to phrase your request so it reflects what you want your child to do. (“Walk, please.”) This gives your child a picture of what you’re requesting in a clear and concise way. Also consider sharing a brief reason why. (“Walk please. That will help keep everyone safe.”) In most cases, children want to comply—they just need us to tell them clearly what we want them to do!
- 2. Offer choices within limits.** This approach gives your child some feeling of control while limiting their options to ones that you feel comfortable offering. It’s also a great technique for encouraging cooperation and instilling a sense of independence. Offer your child two acceptable alternatives: “Do you want to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt today?” “Do you want to sit at this table or that table?” It’s important to note that the choices should be acceptable alternatives—not a choice between the desired behavior and a threat of punishment (such as “Sit down, or go to timeout”).



3. Avoid offering a choice when there isn’t one.

Providing a choice encourages children’s independence and participation in daily activities. But there are times when children need to follow directions and requests to keep themselves and others safe and healthy. In these cases, avoid giving a choice—or implying that there is one. Saying things like, “Walk, please, okay?” with that tag question at the end, or asking questions (“Do you want to help me clean up?”) conveys that your child has the option to say no or to ignore the request. If your child really has no choice, use a simple statement: “It’s time to clean up. Please put the blocks on the shelf.”

These simple yet effective techniques will go a long way toward increasing compliance, thereby creating a more peaceful and productive environment for everyone.

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