

When We Have to Say "No"

by Jan Hunt

"Put the relationship first and then figure out how to fit everything else around that."

- Joyce Fetteroll

"Mommy, look at that train!"

When I overhear a child say something like that in a store, I worry, because so often a stressed parent responds in a negative or punitive way: "You have a room full of toys, stop whining!" I try to remind myself that this parent's reaction may be unusual for her. Everyone loses patience at stressful times, and when a child wants something he can't have, parents can feel frustrated and embarrassed, and wonder how best to handle the situation.

Yet with a little compassion, it can be surprisingly simple. We can share our child's enthusiasm ("Wow! That *is* a nice train!"), explain our reasons for not buying it ("We'll have to wait until we've saved enough money."), recognize his feelings ("I'm really sorry - I know you're disappointed."), and offer an alternative ("Would you like to go to the station and watch the trains come in?"). Simply asking the child if there is something else they would like to do instead can help to defuse a tense situation by giving them more of a voice. And their solution may be more creative than anything we could come up with!

If we just say "no" without giving a reason or showing empathy, we are giving the impression that we don't care about his feelings. He now has two things to be disappointed about: whatever it is that he can't have, and the fact that no one seems to care.

The second disappointment is far more troubling to the child than the first. The first disappointment - not getting something he wanted - will fade in time. But giving a child the impression that we don't care about his feelings can seriously damage the parent-child relationship, lower his self-esteem and make him hesitant to assert his needs in the future. A sincere apology will reassure him that we care about and accept his feelings even though we can't give him what he wants at that moment. Recognition of his feelings, positive eye contact, and a loving hug can go a long way to help a child cope with disappointment. A child needs our understanding, acceptance and connection far more than he needs any tangible item.

It isn't about saying yes or no.

When a child continues to complain about something we can't give, it's not about what he wants, it's about how he feels. Until his feelings are recognized and accepted, he will try in many ways to be heard. It may seem as though he is complaining about not getting the item in question, but it goes much deeper. If we focus only on the item and offer only explanations (it's too expensive; he already has too many things; we don't have time to shop, and so on) and give no sign of hearing and understanding his feelings, he will

simply continue to try to be heard, and that can quickly escalate into cries of helplessness and anger. Once he sees that we genuinely care about his feelings, he can move on much more easily. Only then will his basic need to be heard and respected be met.

When we have to say no, we should at the very least be gentle. It isn't about saying yes or no, it's about respecting the child. As John Holt wrote in *Teach Your Own*, "There is no reason why we cannot say 'No' to children in just as kind a way as we say 'Yes'."

There is also no reason why we cannot stop for a moment and see if there might be a way to say "yes": "Yes, we can go to the park when it stops raining." "Yes, we can buy the train when we have saved enough money."

When my son was little, I was fortunate to come across an article with a compassionate and practical suggestion for handling a child's disappointment in a store - establishing a "wish list" for things that couldn't be purchased yet. I put up a sheet of paper on the fridge with "Jason's Wish List" at the top. I then forgot about it. But some time later, he was admiring a toy boat that didn't fit in that month's budget. Fortunately, I remembered the article, and told him, "What a nice boat! Look at the beautiful sails! I'm so sorry but I can't buy it today. Let's remember where we saw it, and put it on your wish list when we get home." He couldn't wait to do that!

I can't remember if we ever bought the boat, but years later, I was delighted to see that he had remembered this idea. We were in a department store, and I saw a beautiful sweater for myself, but it was too expensive. Then Jason said, "Let's remember where we saw it." In that moment, I understood this principle: If we can find it in our hearts to understand our child's feelings, kindness and empathy can grow through the generations.

See also: [When a Child Has a Tantrum](#) by Jan Hunt, [Temper Tantrums](#) by Rue Kream.

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