

Cooperative Kids Aren't Born, They're Trained

by Scot Patterson

Teaching young children to be cooperative is a critical issue for parents. It sets the stage for the socialization of the child, builds a solid foundation for the parent-child relationship and prevents power struggles and misbehavior. The purpose of this article is to discuss the parent's role in promoting cooperation.

Studies have shown enormous long-term benefits for children who know how to be cooperative and attentive. These children are usually well-liked by their peers and by adults, and people enjoy participating in activities with them and helping them improve their skills.

Cooperative children benefit from a wide variety of positive social experiences that build the skills children need to form friendships, get along with parents and other adults, and be successful in school.

Uncooperative children, on the other hand, are often rejected by their peers because of their unpleasant behavior, and they tend to have low self-esteem and problems in school. As these children grow older, they become defiant and aggressive, and during the teen-age years they are at risk for more serious problems.

Clearly, your efforts to develop a cooperative relationship with your child are very important.

One way to promote cooperation is to establish routines for daily tasks such as putting toys away, putting dirty dishes in the sink, hanging up coats, and so on. The earlier you start developing these routines and the more consistent you are, the less trouble you will have getting children to do simple tasks without nagging. This approach also reduces the risk of getting into power struggles over daily tasks.

The issue of cooperation typically arises when parents make requests. It has been shown that the way parents make requests is very important, so let's take a look at some steps you can take to promote children's cooperation.

Using Requests Effectively

Basically, there are two types of requests: Some requests are attempts to get children to do something, such as pick up their toys. Other requests (or commands) are intended to stop children from doing something, such as hitting the dog. In either case, parents clearly want their children's cooperation.

If children ignore requests, parents often make one of the following mistakes: they either nag their children or let it go. Nagging puts parents in the unpleasant position of badgering, and it gives children attention for being uncooperative. Letting it go, on the other hand, teaches children that it isn't necessary to take their parents' requests seriously.

Planning For Success

It takes planning to use requests effectively. Think about how you feel when people ask you to do something—their approach makes all the difference. Keep this in mind as you consider the five basic rules for making good requests that follow:

- **Be pleasant.** Pay attention to your tone of voice when you ask your child to do something. Try to be pleasant or at least neutral when making requests, even if you're upset with something your child has (or hasn't) done. If you're irritable or angry it just makes a bad situation worse. Also, don't get into the habit of bringing up past failures, criticizing, blaming, or giving a lecture.
- **Use statements.** Parents often use questions when they make requests, such as, "Don't you think it's time to get out of the bathtub now?" Perhaps parents do this because they think it softens their message. The problem with stating your request as a question is that it gives the child an opportunity to argue or simply say "no," and in most cases parents are not willing to accept either of these two responses. Also, it's difficult for a young child to understand what you want him to do if you use a question. Looking back at the previous example, it would be much better to say, "It's time to get out of the bathtub now!"
- **Make one request at a time.** The best way to encourage a child's cooperation is to make one request at a time, using as few words as possible. Also, make sure you say something positive about the child's efforts to respond to each request. If you do this consistently, your child will be more likely to cooperate with your requests in the future.
- **Be specific.** This basic rule of good communication is often overlooked by parents. For example, "Clean up your room" is too vague. It would be better to say, "Pick up your building blocks and put them in the box." The more specific the request is, the better. When the child has finished, look for at least one thing she did well and say something positive about it, such as "That was fast—great job!" Then you can go on to the next thing you want her to do. It's particularly important to use this approach with toddlers and young children.
- **Make realistic requests.** If you follow the four basic rules just discussed, children will try to cooperate with your requests most of the time. Unfortunately, if you ask children to do something that is unrealistic for their age, it is impossible for them to cooperate. As the child's parent, you are in the best position to judge what your child is capable of doing on a given day.

Making requests is a necessary and important part of being a parent. If you practice the steps outlined in this article, you may be surprised at the difference it makes in your child's positive efforts to cooperate with requests and help with daily tasks. It will also set the stage for success as your child interacts with his rapidly expanding social world.

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