

Options to Saying “No!”

by Gerry Morgan

All parents have to manage their children’s behavior, and setting [limits](#) is a particular challenge. Parents may find themselves spending much of their day saying “no” to their kids. Sometimes it’s about safety, such as saying “no” to a toddler who is about to walk out into the street. Other times it’s in response to difficult behavior, such as biting or hitting. Sometimes hearing “no” can result in an angry child who may have an emotional meltdown in response. This is stressful for both parent and child.

There are other options to saying “no.” It would be a great experiment for a child to grow up never hearing the word “no,” to be given expectations rather than corrections all the time. Here are seven helpful hints for [handling unwanted behaviors](#):

- 1. Provide alternatives:** Instead of saying “no,” give your child alternatives. When you say “no,” think about what you really want your child to do. Give your child another option. In response to “Can I go outside?” when going out isn’t a choice, try, “Why don’t we do play dough instead?”
- 2. Try the “first – then” approach:** If your son wants a cookie and you don’t want him to have a cookie until after a meal, instead of “no,” try, “First you have dinner, then you can have a cookie.”
- 3. Use “stop” instead of “no”:** Certainly there are situations where kids need [limits](#), especially in safety issues. There are other ways to set limits. For example, when a child is about to touch something hot, say, “Stop!” instead of “No.” This tells your child what to do rather than what not to do.
- 4. Recognize a need:** When your daughter asks for something you would rather she not have, such as soda or candy, recognize she is thirsty or hungry. You can say, “I can see you are really thirsty. If you’re thirsty, you can have water or juice.”
- 5. Focus on expected behavior:** Tell and show your children what you expect them to do, not what you expect them not to do. An expectation can be to wait, to sit on your lap, to go and play with toys. Rather than say “no” when your son draws on the wall with crayon, say, “We use crayons with paper, not on the wall,” and set him up at the table for a five-minute art project.
- 6. Meltdowns happen:** One thing a parent has to understand – if it’s a limit worth setting and enforcing, you have to accept it could result in a [meltdown](#). Resign yourself to this, and take steps to limit the meltdown from happening. But understand the meltdown is a test, and YOU HAVE TO PASS THE TEST. When you hold firm with the limit and don’t give in to the meltdown, your child is more likely to understand the limit and comply the next time. The next meltdown will be shorter, and eventually your child should understand and accept the limit.
- 7. Be consistent:** Consistency and follow-through are crucial. By being consistent in the language you use and always following through in a predictable manner, your child is

going to be testing less often and you will be able to set limits with a diminished likelihood of meltdowns.

Not saying “no” (or decreasing your use of the negative) takes hard work, but it can help you as a parent to avoid simply reacting to challenging behavior. This should pay off with a happier child and a happier you.

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