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# NO MEANS NO

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## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The consequences of not teaching children that "no means no" are now in the news every single day. Adult men have used power and position to use and abuse others. Women have stepped out of their pain- and shame-induced silence to declare "Me, too!" What can we, as adults who care deeply about the wellbeing of children and the youth and adults they will become, do differently now so that their future is better?

## STARTING EARLY

We have all observed it: A preschooler, thwarted by a parent's refusal of a desired product, activity, food, or toy, begins the process of erosion. "But I W-A-N-T it!" the child wails. Delivered with increased volume and intensity, the parent looks around and notes that everyone is watching. The parent, cornered by the child's persistence and the adult audience's perceived judgment, does one of two things. Either the parent relents and caves in, buys the gimcrack or stays at the park or gives the child the candy bar OR the parent grabs the child by the upper arm, pinches hard, snarls at the child, and drags them out of view.

**Let's unpack this:**

What is going on here? This will be no surprise to any of us. We were once kids and someone said, "no" when we really, really, really wanted something. The desire for something we cannot or should not have is not the problem, nor is it something new to the human family. Kids want what they want when they want it.

## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The adult response is often the problem ... and always teaches a lesson.

- If the adult, embarrassed in public or at an extended family gathering, gives in to quiet the child, appear to be kind, or buy a few minutes of peace and quiet, the child learns to persevere in order to get what they want.
- If the parent ignores the child's request (and the child herself), the child learns she doesn't matter, no one hears her, no one cares.
- If the child is grabbed, snarled at, and dragged off, he learns that big and strong wins.
- What is the message that you want to send, the lesson you want to teach?

## DOING "NO" DIFFERENTLY

- With very young children, redirecting is more effective than the word "no."
- As children grow in age and cognitive ability, use "no" judiciously. Consider what is really a "no," one that makes a difference, and one you are willing and able to enforce.
- Then, enforce it! Make it stick. Be consistent.
- For safety's sake, kids need to recognize that no means no. They need to stop whatever they were doing and pay attention to you.
- Explain why your answer is no. Keep it brief, clear, and age appropriate. This stocks your child's internal library and will let

them learn the reasons, helping them anticipate what else might not be allowed. Avoid the temptation to over-talk it, to go on at length or re-explain.

- Use a kind and respectful, but firm voice. Don't shame your child. Try not to do it in front of an audience.
- If you made a mistake, were arbitrary, or just plain wrong, please tell your child and apologize. (Trust me, this does not erode their respect for you, but grows it.)
- Listen to their feelings and help them articulate those feelings, even and especially when the answer is no. Teach them that they have every right to their emotions and that you understand that they are disappointed and frustrated. Denying their feelings or not expressing them doesn't get rid of them. Instead, bottled up emotions often boil over like a volcano, seemingly inappropriate and out of proportion to whatever precipitated them. Instead, help kids release their emotions in smaller, more appropriate expressions.

## **HELPING KIDS LEARN TO SAY "NO"**

It is absolutely imperative that we also teach our kids to say "no" and mean it. Trust me, at age 15, we want them to say no to drugs, alcohol, bullying, unwanted sexual advances, stealing cars, and countless other risky behaviors.

### **How do we begin?**

- Spend time with your children and their friends. Give them safe, supervised places to hang out.
- Be available to your children and willing to listen as they work through the issues of their lives.
- Talk about your values and what you believe about how people deserve to be treated.
- Let them know that they have a right to say no to any unwanted touch, yes, even from a loving grandmother!

- Challenge examples of behavior that violates your values.
- Point out examples in movies, the news, song lyrics, video games of ways in which people don't deserve to be treated. Talk about ways to confront mistreatment and where to find help.
- Be a role model of both respect and self-respect.
- Teach your kids to problem solve and walk alongside them as they do dress rehearsals of the challenging conversations and confrontations.
- Let each child know that he or she is beloved, made in the image of God, and richly deserving of respect, love, and care from others.

Links to learn more!

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This is the perfect opportunity to call or email Marilyn

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