

6 Strategies to Get Your Child to Cooperate

What to do when your child is disobedient.

By Meri Wallace LCSW

Mar 20, 2012

Your two year old son looks you in the eye, climbs up on the sofa and starts jumping, while you repeatedly tell him not to. What should you do?

All parents are upset when their child blatantly disregards their rules. "Have we failed as parents? Is he going to be a juvenile delinquent?" parents in my workshops and coaching sessions will ask me.

I reassure them that in situations such as these, there is nothing wrong with their little fellow. He is simply acting out some natural developmental issues. Once you understand these issues and work with them effectively, you can gain the co-operation you are looking for.

Young children function according to the pleasure principle. Bouncing in the air on a soft cushioned couch is thrilling. It's much more fun than being a good listener at this age. Similarly children find racing down the street too much fun to easily abandon.

At this age, another issue that causes kids to misbehave, is that young children have little control over their impulses. When they want something they want it now. That's why your child will take a bag of potato chips off the shelf in the supermarket even though you have warned her not to touch anything. Her wishes are urgent and having those chips feels like life and death to her. So she will go for it, even if it means incurring your wrath.

Another powerful underlying factor that you're up against, is small children's need to feel independent. After all, all day long grown-ups tell them what to do. In actuality, from the moment of birth, separating and becoming independent is one of the major developmental goals of childhood.

With all these developmental issues going on, how do you get your child to stop misbehaving? Here are some effective steps you can take to speed your child along the path to co-operation:

1. Explain the reason for your rules. Kids are more willing to listen when they understand why. For instance, you can say, "Jumping on the couch is dangerous. You can get hurt." Using an objective reason works wonders. You might say for example, "It's my job to keep you safe", or "It's our job to keep the furniture safe". Similarly, when he's refusing to brush his teeth, tell him, "You need to brush your teeth. It's my job to keep you healthy." These phrases set limits without creating a power struggle.
2. Acknowledge your child's wishes. It's helpful to say, "I know you would like to jump on the bed." Whenever you can, offer her an alternative, for example, "You can jump on your exercise mat." These words demonstrate an acceptance and respect of her desires and she has less of a need to continue out of protest.
3. Communicate exactly what he should do not what he shouldn't do. For example, "You need to get down from the chair", rather than, "Don't stand on the chair." The more you say "no" or "don't do that", the more opposition you will face. It's often equivalent to waving a red cape at a bull!
4. Use positive motivation. When she's racing around the room refusing to get dressed for school, you might say, "We'd better hurry. Samantha is already waiting for you in the block area."
5. Give a child choices. When he is refusing to get out of the tub, try suggesting, "You can climb out or I can take you out". Your child will feel a measure of independence and control.
6. Use redirection and distraction. If she's throwing her blocks across the room, suggest that you build a tower together. When she's having a tantrum because she wants to touch the computer, suggest that you both go to the kitchen and check on the brownies you are baking. (This changes the atmosphere and ends the debate.)

It's important to understand that learning to follow the rules, like learning the alphabet or any skill is a process that takes place over time. You will need to repeat your rules over and over again and be very patient. As your child grows, his cognitive skills will develop and he will have more life experience under his belt. Ultimately, he will internalize your rules and they will become his guide for making better behavioral choices.