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By [Stephanie Twelto Jacob](#) Jul 30th 2010 2:53PM

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Are you constantly telling your kids no? Or rarely? It turns out both extremes can play a significant role in their long-term development and well-being.

"If there's no 'no' -- no structure or expectations or limitations -- that can be difficult for kids," says Dr. Kristin Hansen Lagattuta, associate

professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis. While saying yes may keep kids happy in the short term, it will be hard on them and their parents in the long term. "The worst-case scenario is creating a spoiled brat who makes every decision and doesn't listen to his parents," says Lagattuta. "We know that kids do best when there are some rules and guidelines so they know what to expect," she says. "So saying no can be a good thing."

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It sets the groundwork for learning that society has boundaries. "One of the biggest things in life is you can't always have your way, which is a really important lesson for kids to learn early on," Lagattuta says. It's their nature to want things their way -- to not have to share a toy with another child, for example, or to want a present for themselves when getting one for a friend's birthday. Saying no in these situations can start teaching kids to compromise and to consider others' feelings, says Lagattuta.

Studies have also shown that children who learn to delay gratification -- who wait to get things they want or who work toward a goal to earn them -- tend to do better in their adult lives academically, professionally and even maritally, says Lagattuta. Not getting your child a trinket every time you go to the store -- and occasionally making him complete a handful of reasonable household tasks (like picking up his toys) to earn the treat -- is a way to delay gratification. It can also instill healthy spending habits by helping kids learn the value of a dollar and how to save and plan for things they might really want.

But there can be drawbacks to saying no, as well. "If a parent is saying no all the time, the child may feel the parent isn't willing to support them or to view things from their perspective," Lagattuta says. "Research has shown that can really affect children's [mental health](#) and overall well-being and happiness when they reach adolescence. If the child is being told what to do 24 hours a day and doesn't have a chance to make a decision or have some personal control, that can be damaging."

The key for parents is to strike a balance. Know the most important times to say no: when the child's or someone else's health and safety is at stake and when fundamental moral issues like justice or fairness to others come into play (taking something that doesn't belong to them or hurting others). "Children need to know where the limits are with these areas and that there are important consequences if they don't follow them," says Lagattuta. "Parents should have confidence that saying no is the best thing to do."

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From there, parents have to determine the other areas in which they are willing or not willing to compromise, says Lagattuta. "It's okay to give kids some choices and practice making decisions in places where it's safe to do so," she says. "Letting them decide whether to wear a green dress or a yellow dress, for example, is not a life or death decision."

Also important to reaping the benefits of saying no is saying it effectively, says Lagattuta. Here's how:

Say it like you mean it.

You don't have to scream but be assertive and say no with confidence and eye contact. "Kids are very perceptive, and if your tone is wishy-washy, they'll pick up on it," says Lagattuta. "And that's when you'll see more begging, whining and other negative behaviors."

Follow through.

If your child starts having a fit, it may be tempting to give in "just this once." But if you say no and cave because of whining, the child is learning, 'If I cry or whine or have a fit after my parent says no, then I'll get what I want,' says Lagattuta. Not following through will also render future no's ineffective. Only say no when you're certain you want to. "If parents are on the fence about whether to say yes or no and they quickly jump to no, it may be harder to follow through."

Repeat.

It may take three times of saying no before kids really understand it's a no. It may be necessary to raise your voice each time until they get it.

Or say yes.

Use this tool very carefully. You can turn a no into a yes or say no now and yes later. "If you say no to your child and they don't cry, whine or beg, but they say okay and react very positively, you may want to reward that behavior," says Lagattuta. "You can say a few minutes later, 'I liked the way that you didn't cry and whine when I told you no and give them a treat or praise for doing the right thing.'" This should be done only on occasion – not every time they obey you.



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Give a reason.

If you say no and your child asks why, giving him a reason will help him understand why there are boundaries, especially in cases where it might not be obvious to him why you're saying no. It's okay to respond with "because I said so" from time to time, but aim to give an explanation more often than not.

Prepare kids for the no.

With younger kids, if you know you're going to a place where they'll ask for something – the toy store or a museum with a gift shop at the end – telling them your expectations before you arrive can help curb crying and whining, says Lagattuta. On the way to the store, explain in a matter-of-fact way that there's probably going to be lots of things they want for themselves but that you're not getting anything for them. Maybe another time but not today – so no crying or whining.

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