

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Always Saying “No”

Question: My two year old is always telling me “No!” How do I get her to say “Yes” sometimes?

All children are uncooperative sometimes. While it can be frustrating, this kind of behavior is normal in young children and actually represents a positive milestone in their development.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics,

[T]he all-purpose word “No!” signals [your child’s] desire for choice and autonomy, and the seeming defiance and negativism ... are actually assertions of an emerging sense of [his/her] own identity.

You can support your child’s early independence while, at the same time, encouraging her to express herself in ways that work for both of you by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Think about how you are responding.

Andrew Meltzoff of the University of Washington reveals just how attuned young children are to the reactions and responses of the important adults in their lives:

[Young children] recognize your emotional expressions and use this to learn. When something unexpected happens, they will rapidly look to [your] face, trying to “read” the adult’s emotional reaction. They are watching and learning from you!

Your child looks to you for cues about how to respond in all kinds of situations, especially ones in which she feels out of control, like when she can’t do something she wants to do. Your tone of voice, body language and facial expressions all send messages to your child.

- Role model the way you want your child to behave—even when she is saying “No” all the time. Children learn more from how you behave than from what you say.
- If you need to calm down because your child’s saying “No” is getting annoying, take a step away if possible. This shows your child the importance of using self control in order to communicate successfully and gives you time to think about things more clearly.
- It is also important to think about what else is going on. Is your daughter more likely to say “No” when she is tired or hungry? Sometimes a snack at the right time can be helpful.

Most crucial of all is for you to let your child know that you are there for her and love her, even when she is saying “No” to everything.

Knowing this negativity is a positive developmental milestone that will pass is helpful. So, instead of thinking of your child as a willful or disobedient person, think of these toddler years as providing a great opportunity for you to help her learn to communicate in more diverse ways.

2

Be intentional about setting limits—what you are saying and how you say it.

- You are the one setting the limits and she needs to respond, but the way you set limits can lead to more or less cooperation. Rather than asking: “Are you ready to get dressed?” (when it isn’t really a question—she needs to get dressed) try saying: “It’s time to get dressed.” Make sure to use an encouraging and positive tone.
- Give your child reasons behind your requests. This helps her understand why you are asking her to do something: “We are going to clean up your toys so that we’ll know where to find them next time.”
- Praise your child’s strategies at Communicating and cooperating. Be specific about the behavior you want to reinforce: “Thank you for telling me you don’t want to wear your sweater because you are hot. We will bring it with us in case it gets colder.”

3

Be a communication role model, using “extra talk.”

In their book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young Children*, Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley found—on the basis of an observational study following parents and children beginning at nine months through 36 months—that parents use two different types of language in talking with their children. One is business talk—like “Stop that” or “Do this”—that expresses the adult’s needs. The other is extra talk—where parents talk about “what if,” “remember” and “what do you think” or use other words that respond to, elaborate and extend what their children are doing or saying.

A big part of Communicating is figuring out what you want to say and how to say it so that you will be understood. By being an example of good communication, you can help your child sharpen these skills:

- **Reflect back to your child what her words are telling you.** Sometimes young children like to say the word “No” even if they mean something else. Make sure to clarify with your child so that she is aware of the message she is communicating: “You said you don’t want any more dinner. Is your stomach full?”
- **Use open-ended questions instead of those that require a yes/no answer.** These are questions that start with “who,” “what,” “where,” “when” and “why.” Even if your child can’t give you full answers to these questions yet, you are encouraging her to think beyond her immediate response.

4

Encourage your child to express herself in many different ways.

Support your child to explore how to express herself with and without words. Activities like painting, music and movement are all great ways to express thoughts and feelings freely.

- Ask her to tell you about her drawings and write down her words. Children love to be the authors of their own stories.
- Ask her to paint a picture about how she feels when she has to do something she doesn't want to do. Talk about what you notice in your child's creation instead of just complimenting it.
- Play different kinds of music and encourage your child to paint what she hears. This is a great way to get a glimpse of how your child interprets what she hears.

5

Engage in back and forth conversations and activities with your child.

Researchers have compared good communication to a dance or a ping pong game or “Take Turns Talk”. This back and forth, back and forth—where you build on and extend what she says and does—is the foundation of relationships and communication.

- When your child is saying “No,” you can help her focus on something else that truly interests her.
- Play games like peekaboo or roll a ball between you and your child to promote the idea of taking turns and responding to others.
- Throughout the day, repeat your child's words and sounds back to her and then add on to them.

6

Engage in pretend play.

Your child uses pretend play to “replay” and control events in her life. Pretending is a fun way for your child to practice her communication skills in a supportive and safe environment.

- **Join with your child and allow her to take the lead.** Instead of taking over and telling your child what to do, be a guide. Let her be in charge of her play. You can model appropriate language and expand on her ideas.
- **Give your child playful occasions to say “No!”** If you are pretending to dress up, put socks on your hands and say: “Is this where we wear socks? No!” Take turns with your child to come up with silly situations where she can say “No!” as much as she wants.