

Getting your Kids' Cooperation Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.

No matter how well-mannered your children are there's always room for improvement. Trust me, as a mom and a psychologist I know because I've been there! Kids are kids and adults are adults—and that's where the differences in priorities often come into play. What *now* means to an adult is, well, *now*. To a child, however, *now* can be interpreted as “at the next commercial break”, “when I feel like doing it” or just “whatever”. Most families that I've worked with have the problem of getting kids to do what is necessary in a timely manner. And, there are two other universal issues that I deal with almost constantly in my practice. First, getting children to *take no for answer* without an onslaught of nagging, hassling and begging is always a challenge, as is dealing with *sibling bickering, fighting and teasing*. Sound like your home? Want to stop it or at least tone down these maddening kid behaviors to a dull roar? Well, there's no better time than *now* to make some resolutions for family change and to follow them throughout the year!

Setting Up a Plan

To motivate children to get moving when they are asked to turn off the TV and come in for dinner, or to take a bath, clean up the bedroom or complete their homework you have to have a plan. And, the plan needs to be simple and convenient in order for you to carry it out, have some teeth to it so that it will be effective, and practical if you are going to be consistent. Over the years I've devised several types of systems ranging from the simplistic to the tediously complex, and I've found that it's a trade off of sorts. The more detailed and complex the rules are for the kids, the better the system works. However, when Mom or Dad feel like the program takes too much time and attention they begin to slack off, and so do the children. Most parents end up with a balanced approach—focusing upon the most important behaviors that need to be changed and using the most convenient form of keeping track of misbehavior.

All behavioral change systems have three components. **First you need to set up a place to mark down demerits as they occur throughout the day.** A calendar with at least one-inch square boxes for each day works well, and you can denote each child's demerits by simply writing down the first letter of the first name. For instance, if Meghan doesn't clean up her bedroom on time, writing an “M” on today's box on the calendar notes this. If she displays another inappropriate behavior, another “M” follows and the total can be counted as the day proceeds.

The second part of the behavior change program is to determine how many demerits are allowed each day. The acceptable number depends upon how picky the parents are (and therefore how quickly demerits will be given) as well as how squirrely the kids are! It may be wise to start by allowing eight or nine demerits per day if your kids are fairly noncompliant or impulsive and then lowering the acceptable number as the weeks go by. If your children are more accommodating, then you may want to start with permitting only four or five per day.

The final component of the program involves setting up reasonable and effective consequences. *Reasonable* means that you and your child can live with the *penalties* for misbehavior—if you’re not going to follow-through its better not to threaten in the first place. Taking the bike away for a year probably won’t happen, but you can follow-through with that consequence for a week or even a month. Also, the *rewards* that you offer must be within your means—don’t promise five dollars allowance per day unless you can afford that amount as well as believe it to be appropriate for your children to earn.

Effective means that the consequence *hurts*—not in the physical sense such as in spanking or swatting—but it has to really bother the kid or it’s not worth doing. I’ve found that children dislike being bored more than just about anything else—so consider temporarily removing a privilege such as television, video games, computer usage or playtime. Time-out in a boring and safe spot can be effective for young children (teens love to hide-out in their bedrooms so time-out for adolescents is often less than effective). You can also use incentives for appropriate behavior that get your kids’ attention—whether it’s a daily allowance, clothing money or a later bedtime or curfew. Again—whether the consequence is positive (a reward or incentive) or negative (loss of privilege or time-out) it has to be *important to the child* in order to be effective.

Doing As Told When Told

Okay, now that we’ve discussed the basics that must be in place for a behavior change system to work, let’s focus upon getting your kids moving. The best tool that I’ve found in my over twenty-five years of working with families is a **count-down timer**. This is a device that can be purchased for about ten dollars at any grocery store—it’s commonly referred to as an “egg timer” and can be found in mechanical or digital versions. I prefer the digital type as it’s more accurate and convenient to use, and I suggest that you buy one for yourself and one for the kids.

When you want your child to complete a task (brush teeth, turn off a video game, complete homework) just set the two timers, hand one to the kid and state your request. “James, I’m setting our timers for ten minutes. You are to put your toys away before the buzzer goes off or you will get a demerit. And, I’ll be sure to check up when my timer buzzes.” Then walk away and just watch the kid move! No nagging, reminding or coaxing allowed—just praise the child when he beats the buzzer or mark the calendar with a demerit if he doesn’t. No arguing or negotiating necessary—this takes the ambiguity out of parenting, and as most of us have realized, it’s those gray areas that cause so many family arguments! The task is either completed on time or it isn’t and children very quickly learn that there’s no percentage in arguing the point—their folks have already moved on!

Not Taking *No* For An Answer

Picture this—you're in the grocery store with your six and eleven-year-old children, and one is hitting you up for a candy bar while the other is whining for a toy. Kids can be relentless when it comes to nagging their parents, especially when they are in a public place and know that Mom or Dad do not want to be embarrassed by bratty behavior. Most of us, at one time or another, have caved in and bought the item just to placate the child and we pay for that weak moment time and again.

A behavioral tactic that works well with children who don't like to take *no* for an answer is to give *one warning* (that's right, just *one warning*) that if the whining, fussing or nagging doesn't stop *immediately* that a demerit will be given. And do it. Threatening and warning without action only teaches the child to continue to nag and whine. Action (the giving of a demerit) speaks volumes, especially if you follow-through and provide the consequence at the end of the day if too many demerits have been accumulated. Remember that the consequence has to be important to the child or this tactic will not make a dent in the inappropriate behavior.

Giving demerits for not taking no for an answer works with pre-teens and teenagers as well. Adolescents can be pro's at nagging and begging, hoping that you'll give in and hand over the keys to the car or allow six friends to sleep over, even if you have to get up early for work the next morning. If the kid request is unreasonable then say *no* and move on. Don't even begin the negotiations or discussion if you really are not willing to allow the behavior or privilege. You're sending the wrong message by saying "maybe" or "let me think about it." Now, there's nothing wrong with postponing a decision until you've gathered more data or had time to consider the alternatives—it only becomes a problem when you really mean *no* but are too wimpy to utter the word. Just say it and hand out the demerits if the kid keeps pushing. After she's lost her telephone and computer privileges and she sees that you're sticking to your guns, she'll get the message and understand better that *no means no* in the future.

Sibling Battles

Most brothers and sisters fight, bicker, tease and argue. I'm convinced that it is the sport of childhood as kids don't seem to mind the ruckus nearly as much as their folks do! So don't expect them to stop the fighting just to help out your sanity. But, they will learn to tone it down if you give them demerits for the jousting—especially if your family rule is "anyone in a fight gets a demerit—I don't even want to hear about who started it." Sure, they'll be indignant at first if you stay out of their arguments and just hand out the demerits, but soon you'll see that it just isn't worth it to the kids to clobber each other (either verbally or physically) if all that happens is that they both lose. At times it will be unfair that the victim received a demerit also, but over time the inequity seems to even out! By using this system kids learn to argue quietly so that their folks don't hear them, or they begin to ignore each other's annoying behavior and become more tolerant in an effort to avoid receiving demerits.

Be Consistent, Use Catastrophic Consequences and Be Clear

The three C's—consistency, catastrophic consequences and clarity of rules are necessary in motivating children to change inappropriate behavior. It's not always easy for parents to pull off, but in the long run handing out demerits, taking away privileges for inappropriate behaviors or providing incentives and rewards for proper actions is a more pleasant path to a peaceful home! Consider it your gift to yourself as well as to the kids!