

When to ask, when to tell, and when to offer choices

Fostering cooperation in our children can be a blood-pressure altering event. With so many chores that need to be done during the day, we can feel like a drill sergeant, police officer and the Wicked Witch of the West all rolled into one.

To avoid appearing to our children as a triumvirate of meanness and control, we may overcompensate and be too polite and kind by asking for cooperation instead of simply expecting cooperation.

Certain items are not negotiable, and for those requests we should not ask for compliance.

When we say, "Honey, would you please take the garbage out? Okay?" it sounds to our children like they have the right of refusal. A better way to gain cooperation is to use a factual statement: "It's time to take the garbage out, please. It's starting to smell."

To our children (and our spouses, too) requests can be interpreted too literally by the use of the helping verbs can, will and might.

"Can you take out the garbage, please," might be interpreted as "Are you able or do you know how to take out the garbage?" The answer might be a silent "yes", but no action.



"Will you or would you take out the garbage?" might be interpreted as "When you have the time would you be willing to take out the garbage?" Again, with a literal interpretation, the responder might think they have a choice over the matter.

"May I ask you to take out the garbage?" Are you beginning to see the language trap we get caught in when we ask instead of tell?

It might seem too forceful and perhaps impolite to say "I need to you to take out the garbage right now, please." The statement is clear and concise and doesn't lend itself to misinterpretation. Plus, it works.

Life is not all about giving clear directions. We should give our children choices whenever we can. Practicing free choice is a key component in developing self-discipline and fostering cooperation with others. We give choices when it is appropriate to give choices.

For the young child we can give choices about clothes: Do you want to wear your blue shirt or green shirt today?

We can give choices about food: Would you like green beans or broccoli with dinner tonight? Notice that the question is not an open-ended, "What would you like for dinner?"

We can give choices about sequence of events: "Would you like to read a book before or after you put on your pajamas?"

Here's a chart to help you think about the differences between ask, tell and giving choices. Remember that choices you give should be appropriate for the circumstances:

Ask: Are you ready to leave now?

Tell: It's time to go now. Remember to buckle up.



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Kids Talk™

Choice: Would you like to go now or in fifteen minutes?

Ask: Are you going to fill the dog's water dish?

Tell: Our dog looks thirsty. Time to fill up his bowl, please.

Choice: Would you like to give the dog water now or after snack?

Ask: Where are your shoes? We're late.

Tell: Put your shoes on. It's time to go.

Choice: Do you want to put your shoes on now or in the car?

Ask: Would you pick up your toys?

Tell: Time to put your toys on your shelves, please.

Choice: Would you like me to help you put away your toys or do you want to do it yourself?

To foster cooperation be sure you ask only when giving appropriate choices to direct behavior, or give clear directions with no choice implied. Remember: saying "please" and "thank you" help smooth the waters of cooperation.

Kids Talk™ is an award-winning column dealing with childhood development issues written by Maren Stark Schmidt, M.Ed. She has more than 25 years experience working with young children and is the author of Understanding Montessori: A Guide for Parents. Contact her via e-mail at maren@kidstalknews.

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