



How to Say "No" to Children

by Dick Emmons

ONE OF THE GLARING weaknesses in the field of child denial results from the fact that for every child, there happen to be two parents.

Children know this. At least, as soon as they can count to two, they know it. Then they begin using a stratagem known as Playing Mommy Off Against Daddy, and Vice Versa.

So far as I have been able to determine, medical science has done little to reduce the number of parents needed for child-birth, and it seems to me they're mighty slow getting around to it. Meanwhile, the child performs as follows:

"Daddy, can I have a nickel for an ice-cream cone?"

"Certainly not. Do you know what nickels cost these days?"

(Runs upstairs to find mother sewing on the bias.)

"Mommy, can I have a nickel for an ice-cream cone?"

"Goodness, child, don't ask me! You know very well your father never gives me any money!"

(Runs downstairs again.)

"Mommy says you're the one who has the money, Daddy!"

Daddy, construing this to mean that his wife has approved the expenditure, hands over the nickel without further argument. Childhood has won again on the tried and true divide-and-conquer theory.

My suggestion to these parents would be for the one approached first to affix a small tag to the child's pinafore reading "I said 'No'" and properly initialed. Unless the offspring in question is a clever forger, this message should get through to the second parent and give him or her some clue as to what took place elsewhere in the house.

(In the event that the child is a clever forger, the parents might give him a sheaf of blank checks and sit back to watch the money roll in.)

Another group of parents falls easy prey because they don't know how to say "No." Instead they say, rather dully, "Oh, all right, go ahead." This type of parent needn't concern the reader unduly, however. I am convinced that almost all of them live in our neighborhood and go around saying "Oh, all right, go ahead" to their children at the very same time we are saying "No" to ours in answer to the same request.

This makes for a certain amount of unrest around our house, and it is with these parents in mind that I shall now describe how to say "No" to a beseeching child. Place the tip of the tongue on the roof of the mouth near the front teeth and, enunciating clearly, say "Know." If all goes well, this should come out sounding like "No."

Those sensitive parents who simply can't force themselves to make this sound may try shaking their heads vigorously from side to side, as though bothered by oat-flies. Any child who interprets this as a sign of assent should be examined at the earliest opportunity by a competent pediatrician or perhaps a psychiatrist, if one can be found with a short cough.

Even when the parent has mastered the art of firmly answering children in the negative, he may find that all is not won.

Many an earnest parent has come apart at the seams when forced to cope with a shrewd little artifice known in the short-pants world as the Tommy's-Daddy-Said-He-Could routine. Garnished with moist, round eyes turned upward reproachfully, this ruse has seldom been known to fail.

Logic, a feeble trait at best, has no place in combatting this approach. It will get you nowhere to point out that Tommy's father is one person and you are someone else. In the child's mind, Tommy's daddy, having granted the request, is already established as someone pretty special while you, having denied it, are nobody.

Perhaps the best course for you to pursue is simply to mutter, "Tommy's daddy is an utter fool."

Let me qualify this last bit of advice by saying that individual circumstances should be considered carefully before the remark is made. If you happen to know, for instance, that Tommy's daddy once played for the Chicago Bears, this is not the best thing to say.

Some other course would be better. "Oh, all right, go ahead," is one possibility.

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