

Excerpt from pp. 187-194 of the book *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids* by Laura Markham, PhD from a chapter entitled Raising a Child Who *Wants* to Behave

WEAN YOURSELF OFF CONSEQUENCES: TWELVE TERRIFIC ALTERNATIVES

My three-and-a-half-year-old was sitting on the couch after her bath wearing her towel and said “No” about five times when I asked her to get into her PJs. I was busy with the baby and I heard my husband threaten, “Okay, fine— no books, then,” and your quote popped into my head and I said, “Hey! We’ve got a problem— it’s bedtime and you need to be in your PJs. How do you think we should solve it?” And just like that, she got a big grin her face, suggested we all clap our hands and march our feet, and we formed a line right into her room—happily! Same thing for teeth brushing and potty later! Each time I said, “Hey, great problem-solving skills! Thank you!” And her response? “You’re welcome, Mama— no problem!”

—Carrie, mother of two

Let your child solve it. *“You haven’t brushed your teeth yet and I want to be sure we have time for a story. What can we do?”* Children love to help and to solve puzzles. Sometimes they just need to be given the chance—and a little respect.

Partner for win/win solutions. If your child doesn’t offer a solution that works for you, explain why and help her come up with one. *“You think you should just skip brushing teeth tonight? Hmm . . . That doesn’t work for me because your poor teeth would stay germy and they could get little holes in them. What else could we do to get your teeth brushed and time for a story? Want to put your PJs on, and then brush?”*

Once your child believes that you’re serious about win/ win solutions, she’s much more likely to work with you to find a solution that works for everyone.

Invite cooperation with your phrasing. Consider the difference in these approaches:

- *“Go brush your teeth now.”* Since no one likes to be told what to do, a direct order like this often invites resistance, either direct or in the form of stalling.
- *“Can you go brush your teeth now?”* Many kids will reflect on this and just say *no*. Don’t phrase your request in the form of a yes-or-no question unless you’re willing to accept *no* for an answer.
- *“Do you want to brush your teeth now, or after you put your PJs on?”* You’re extending your child the respect of giving him some control, at the same time that you retain the responsibility of making the decisions you need to as his parent. Only offer options you can live with, of course.
- *“You may brush your teeth now.”* Almost sounds like a privilege, doesn’t it? This is a command, but a respectful one. Works especially well with kids who get overwhelmed by choices.

Offer mastery. Let her take charge of as many of her own activities as possible. Don't nag at her to brush her teeth; ask, *"What else do you need to do before we leave?"* If she looks blank, tick off the short list: *"Every morning we eat, brush teeth, use the toilet, and pack the backpack. I saw you pack your backpack; good for you for getting that out of the way! Now, what do you still need to do before we leave?"* Children who feel more independent and in charge of themselves will have less need to rebel and be oppositional. Not to mention they take responsibility early.

Ask for a do-over. *"Oops. I told you to brush your teeth and you ignored me and then I started to yell. I'm sorry. Let's try a do-over."* This is a great way to interrupt things when you're headed down a bad road. Get down on your child's level and make a warm connection. Look in her eyes. Touch her. *"Okay, let's try this again, sweetie. It's teeth brushing time! How can we work as a team here to get your teeth brushed?"*

Make it a game. *"You don't want to get in your car seat? This is your pilot speaking. This rocket ship is ready for blastoff. Please buckle up! Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . . six . . ."*

Divert the oppositional energy with physical, playful reconnection. *"What do you mean you don't want to put on your PJs? Come here, you won't-wear-PJs-boy! I'll show you who's boss around here! Where do you think you're going? You'd better get over here and put on your PJs! I'm the PJs enforcer and I always get my man! Hey, you got away!"* Bumble, trip, and fall. Put the PJs on your own head to get him giggling even more. When you finally catch him, roughhouse until you collapse in each other's arms. Now that the mood has changed to one of connection, assume compliance and offer a choice: *"Do you want to put your PJs on while you listen to the story, or are you getting cold enough to need them on first?"*

Give her what she wants with a wish. *"I bet when you're grown up you'll stay up all night, every night, won't you?"*

Give her what she wants for real. Many disputes are not worth a power struggle. *"I hear that you don't want to wear your jacket today. But I'm afraid that you'll be cold once we're outside. How about I put your jacket in the backpack, and then we'll have it if you change your mind?"*

She's not going to get pneumonia. As long as she won't lose face by asking for the jacket, she'll put it on when she gets cold.

Put your child in charge. *"You don't want to get in your car seat? That's okay, we have time. You get in when you're ready. I'll read my book while I wait."*

Engage the rational brain. Move past fight-or-flight by telling the story: *"You were having so much fun playing with Daddy. Then he told you to go brush your teeth. You were mad, right? . . . Then Daddy said no story tonight. Right? . . . Now you are sad and mad. . . . I am right here. I love you. Daddy loves you. Daddy was upset, too, but now he is here to hug you. . . . Let's find a way that we can all have a good evening and feel good when we tuck you in to bed. Maybe we all need a do-over?"* This builds emotional intelligence in your child—and in your partner. And even if it doesn't get you all on the same page, at least it gets you into the same book!

Get to the root of the problem. Often when kids defy us, they're asking for help with their emotions. You'll know this is happening when your child seems unhappy and is making you unhappy; when whatever you try just doesn't work. At those times, your child is showing you that he has some big feelings he needs to express, and he needs your help. So if you set a limit and your child defies you, forget about punishment and consequences. Move in close, look him in the eye, and restate your limit with as much compassion as you can muster. Help him have his meltdown. After your child gets a chance to dissolve that hard knot of unhappy emotion, you'll find him much more cooperative.

If we're in a rut of threats and consequences, retraining ourselves can be tough. The key is to eliminate the word consequences from your vocabulary and replace it with problem solving. You'll be amazed at the difference.

HOW TO INTERVENE IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

When I get down on my knees and empathize with my three-year-old, it defuses a tantrum and makes her feel loved. Sometimes she needs a tight squeeze, or to really push or fight against me, like head-butting a pillow. And sometimes the tantrum is insurmountable and it seems like we'll never get through it. But she's starting to mirror my deep cleansing breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. And she says things like, "Mommy, we don't yell, right?" Baby steps. As a single parent I still lose it, but when I see her taking deep breaths and trying not to have fits, I know it's making a difference.

—Carrie, mother of a three-year-old and a baby

There's a major storm brewing, or maybe it's already hit. What can you do in the heat of the moment?

- **Keep everyone safe physically.** That means stopping the car, separating the fighting kids, removing yourself from flailing fists, or even holding your child's hands as she tries to hit you. Kids need to know that parents will keep everyone safe.
- **Keep everyone safe emotionally so that learning can happen, by modeling emotional regulation.** We keep kids safe emotionally by staying connected, empathizing, refraining from attacking. By contrast, when we move into fight-or-flight, we lose the chance to calm our child.
- **Limit the behavior and provide guidance for what needs to happen.** Kindly, calmly, firmly take whatever action is necessary to address the situation. Pick your child up from the supermarket cart and carry him to the car, leaving the cart behind and saying, "*We'll go back when you're ready.*"
- **Help your child work through her emotions so she can manage her behavior.** How do we teach kids to manage their emotions? In the heat of the moment, we listen, with as much compassion as we can summon. When your child yells "*I hate you!*" just listen and reflect so your child feels heard: "*You must be very angry to speak to me that way. . . . What's going on, sweetie?*" Then listen. Reflect: "*So you were mad when . . . I understand. . . . Let's all try a do-over.*"

Notice that “holding your child accountable” isn’t on this list? That doesn’t happen in the heat of the moment; that happens after everyone has calmed down. (See “Empowering Kids to Make Amends with the 3 Rs: Reflection, Repair, and Responsibility,” next in this chapter.) He’ll be able to learn better then. And you’ll be able to teach a lot better, too.

EMPOWERING KIDS TO MAKE AMENDS WITH THE THREE RS: REFLECTION , REPAIR, AND RESPONSIBILITY

While kids always resist apologizing on the field of battle, they generally want to reconnect and rejoin the warm bonds of the family once their feelings have been heard. How can you empower your child to take responsibility for and repair any damage he’s done, whether to a relationship or to property? Use the three Rs of making amends: reflection, repair, and responsibility.

- **Reflect.** When you ask open-ended questions and help your child “narrate” what happened, her rational brain gains understanding. This gives her more control over her emotions and behavior in the future. *“You were so worried when Eliza took your doll that you hit her. . . . She was hurt and cried. . . . So Mommy put the doll away and you were even more scared and cried, too, right? But then everyone finished crying and you and Eliza had fun with the teddy bears, right? Sometimes you worry when other children touch your special toys. But no one will take your doll home. That is your doll and it lives here with us. If you get worried, what could you do instead of hitting?”*
- **Repair.** When your child damages a relationship, empower him to repair it. Can he get an ice pack for his sister? Draw her a picture? This should not feel like a punishment, but a way to repair a valued relationship that was inadvertently damaged. Young children usually prefer this to a coerced apology, which feels humiliating rather than empowering. *“You hurt your brother’s feelings when you knocked over his tower. What could you do to make him feel better? You want to help him rebuild his tower? Great! Why don’t you offer that to him, and see what he says? Do you think he might also like a hug?”*
- **Responsibility.** The beginning of responsibility is seeing that his choices have a big impact on the world, and that he can always make a choice: “response-ability.” Offer observations as he goes through his day to help him notice the choices he’s making and the results: *“You sure made Michael happy when you gave him a turn with the truck.”* This works better than praise or punishment to empower him to make wise choices.

Unlike punishment or forced apologies, the three Rs of making amends give your child the foundation to manage both her emotions and her behavior. Worried that your child won’t learn to apologize? If you apologize to her, she’ll learn from your example how to apologize to you and to others.