

# Parent guide: How to say no to your child

Giving in to their demands denies them the opportunity to be resourceful and resilient

By J.R. Ram

Do you pre-chew your child's food and then baby-bird it into their mouth? Like Alicia Silverstone literally does as per her book on parenting where she dispenses such wise advice? (*The Kind Mama: A Simple Guide to Supercharged Fertility, a Radiant Pregnancy, a Sweeter Birth, and a Healthier, More Beautiful Beginning*)

Or, are you more of a helicopter parent like Kajol in her new film *Helicopter Eela*? There are other varieties of parenting too. The list is endless. You can literally pick and choose between being a snowplough, outsourcing, tiger, free range, attachment, authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, or neglectful parent.

I remember conversing with the mother of a teenage son who had put in an advertisement in the Sunday edition of a leading English daily in Calcutta looking for a private tutor for her son, who was in Class IX. There was nothing unusual about that part, but I fell off my chair when I heard that this person was going to be his ninth tutor.

His job would not be to tutor her son, but to manage the other eight and liaise with and supervise them. The new appointee would monitor whether the others were doing their job properly. She was absolutely earnest in her wish and it was then that her husband brought her to me, seeking counselling!

## **Family belief systems**

One of the privileges of working with children and families as a psychiatrist is that you get a ringside view of the varied belief systems that guide adults in their role as a parent or a carer. The commonest dilemma with which a parent or a carer comes is regarding how to say no to their children. Many parents are truly petrified of saying no to their children, for a variety of reasons.

Families vary. Situations in which families and children live vary. Hence, why a particular set of parents finds it difficult to discipline their child also varies. The role of a professional is to understand the finer nuances of relationship dynamics in each family and offer some customised solutions, which can be attempted to bring about change.

For some children who live in extended families with their grandparents, there's often a deliberate undermining of the mother's authority by the grandparents. Saying yes to the demands of the child by a grandparent after a parent has said no gives the child de facto authority to undermine disciplinary measures instituted by parents. Thus, the grandparents win a proxy war against the parents, usually the mother.

The other common situation is when parents are forced to say yes is when they are mortally scared of their child. Fear of coercive violence, forcing parents to meet their demands is not uncommon, at least in children brought to mental health professionals.

The violence and coercion of children against their parents arise in a context. In most of these situations, parents, in the past, had themselves resorted to physical punishments and physical violence to discipline the child.

We all know the truism “violence begets violence”. It is only a matter of time, then, before parents get paid back in the same coin. The fear of actually being physically harmed leads to parents into a state of “learned helplessness”. They have to say yes, even when they want to say no.

In my conversations with such families, children clearly indicate that parents do not have the moral authority to ask them to not use violence. Why? Because parents have themselves used it on them in not so recent past. So, now parents do not have the moral authority to say violence is wrong.

The other category of parents who struggle to say no are anxious parents. They are well-meaning, kind and gentle folk who worry that saying no will scar their children emotionally and they may even kill themselves if their demands are not met. “Just read the newspapers, doctor,” they plead.

Their reference points are the multitude of media reports of children who have committed suicide when they were not allowed to buy an Internet pack, a mobile phone, or for some other rather trivial disappointments.

### **Don't take the easy way out**

An important socio-economic change which has put parents in a dilemma about saying no to their children is the relative economic affluence or “affluenza” in some families in modern India.

Saying yes to demands takes less time and money. Doing so is easy as parents can then go on to do more interesting or important things. By saying no, one has to converse more with the child and deal with a truculent person who is not letting go.

Saying no takes up more time for parents. In the modern world, time is at a greater premium for some than money. Superficial harmony and smiling, happy children being showered with gifts provides better photo opportunities for social media than sulking unhappy children. So, for some parents, consciously choosing to say yes is undoubtedly a lot easier.

At the risk of sounding harsh and unkind, I will state that I am strongly in favour of saying no to children as and when needed and justified. The grey area is, whose justification are we considering? Balancing rights and responsibilities of both parents and children may not

always be easy, but I feel that it is important for children to realise that disappointment is as much part of life as joy.

Accepting disappointments and frustration is perhaps one of the biggest skills which enables individuals to become stronger and more resilient. If we do not immediately get what we want, we start thinking of creating alternatives to satisfy our wishes.

If we do not get a particular toy or cannot attend a specific party, how can we fill the void? It forces children to think of alternative solutions. By acquiescing to all their demands, we may stifle their power of imagination and ability to create solutions. Coming to terms with a no is often the beginning of activating resourcefulness.

### **Let the kids find alternatives**

So, what can parents do to make saying no to their children more acceptable? The starting point for parents is to understand that saying no is often necessary to raise better and more resilient children.

Just saying no is never good enough. Calmly explaining why their demands cannot be met is necessary. If the emotions are running high or the child is sulking, calming and soothing the child is important. After emotions settle down, revisiting the reasons why the specific demand could not be met is crucial.

Giving alternatives is important — “You cannot play computer games now but you can do either of the following... (giving three or four concrete examples of other activities).”

Talking to children about personal experiences of disappointments and not getting our wishes fulfilled is important. It makes them understand that adults, too, do not get everything they want. Children may have this magical belief that in the adult world, getting every desire fulfilled is easy.

Talk to children through stories about managing disappointments. Create stories of people having to make difficult choices and ask what they think of it. Plant ideas through stories and sharing personal experiences. Do not preach, but converse and exchange thoughts.

There are many reasons why saying no to children is important. The most important and simple reason is that life does not fulfil every wish for any of us, even for the most fortunate ones. Accepting disappointments and moving forward can at least be partly taught to children by not making them believe in the illusion that they can get everything they want.

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