

Ditching the word “Don’t”

by Amy McCreedy

Don’t be late. Don’t run in the house! Don’t tease your sister. DON’T RUN IN THE HOUSE! If you were to keep track, how many times a day would you find yourself uttering the dreaded four-letter word of childhood: don’t?

While our motives are good, our no, don’t, and other negative commands cause more problems than they solve. In fact, they play a big role in how our kids perceive themselves and in the amount of cooperation they give us. Switching up the words we use, however, can make our action match our intention.

Let’s start by understanding 3 reasons why “don’t” often doesn’t work:

1) No and don’t get discouraging, fast. Imagine having someone in your life – a boss or a spouse, for example – who began the majority of their communication with no or don’t. It wouldn’t take long to feel downright crummy about ourselves, and our kids are no exception. It goes without saying that we want our kids to have a positive self-image, and we need to make sure our language reflects that.

2) Negative commands are confusing. I facilitate an in-class exercise with parents in which I give moms and dads a series of “don’t” commands: “Don’t sit down, don’t look at me, don’t stand still, don’t look at your neighbor,” and so forth. The look on their faces is priceless: they take on a “deer in the headlights” expression as they try to process what they should and should not do.

Our children face the same problem. Negative commands, such as “don’t” and “no” require a double mental process: our kids first must understand what not to do, and then figure out what they’re supposed to do instead. For example, “don’t be late” might mean to us, “shut off those video games and go get dressed for your band concert,” but to a child it doesn’t really mean anything.

3) It reinforces the negative behavior. If I were to say to you “don’t touch your face”, one of the first things you’ll think to do is, ironically, to touch your face. Our children are again hardwired the same way. Our well intentioned “don’t bother your brother while he’s studying” instead inspires our kids to keep their sibling from completing his homework.

While it’s okay to say “no” and “don’t” sometimes, you’ll get more cooperation from your kids if you can avoid them. Use these three strategies to cut back on the negatives and promote the positives:

1) Tell your kids what to DO. Start switching each “don’t” to a “do.” Instead of reminding your child, “Don’t track mud all over the floor!” try, “Please take off your shoes before coming into the house!” Swap, “Don’t chew on your sister’s Lego’s,” with, “Please keep those out of your mouth.”

2) Just say “Yes!” While it’s quicker and easier to reply, “No,” when your child asks to go to the library while you’re knee-deep in closet re-organization, try substituting a, “Yes, that sounds great. I can take you later this afternoon or tomorrow morning—which would you prefer?” Replace, “You’re not leaving this house until your homework is done!” with, “Yes, you can play with your friends when you’ve finished your homework.”

3) Say thank-you in advance. Help your kids make an appropriate choice by taking this leap of faith. Your, “Thank you for hanging up your towel after your shower,” will encourage your kids toward good behavior much more than, “I better not see your towel on the floor again!”

Making these changes to your communication style will require some effort but the payoff will be well worth it. Your kids will feel more encouraged, they will develop a positive, empowered perception of themselves, and you will enjoy better cooperation all around.