

The Gift of "No"

The title of this piece may startle or surprise you. After all, few enjoy the limits and finality the word "no" implies. Could such a thing ever be considered a way to show favor toward someone, or to offer assistance, as the dictionary suggests a gift should be? In my twenty years as a parent, counselor, and public educator I have come to see that saying "no," when done judiciously and appropriately, *is* a gift all children deserve, for it enables them to grow into the responsible, balanced adults we wish them to become.

Fundamentally, the world is not limitless. No matter what a family's resources or philosophy, there are societal rules that cannot be ignored, unsafe acts that should be avoided, chores that must ultimately be faced, life events that are out of our control. Everyone, even reluctantly, must learn to cope with these natural limits life brings. This gift of "no" teaches children they cannot have everything they want, when they want it. It says, "you must consider the environment and other people before you act." It implies that many decisions are not up to children, and that sometimes children must do things they do not wish to do. "No" helps to keep children safe. And, most humbly, this gift gives children a realistic view of life by saying "you are not in charge of, or the center of, the world."

Yet saying "no" to our children and consistently following through on limits may be one of the hardest parenting skills to recognize, learn and master. It is an art to use "no" wisely, consciously avoiding the dangers of being overly restrictive and punitive, while being willing to discipline when necessary. In studying the challenge of limit setting within myself as a parent, and with the parents I counsel, I see an increasing confusion about the importance of discipline, and a consequent reluctance to provide children with the instruction they need in accepting limits. The gift of "no" is becoming more difficult to give, for various reasons.

Culturally, we live at a time in the United States when choices are highly valued and apparent everywhere, from the supermarket to national politics, creating the illusion of limitless bounty and acquisition. Even limit-setting families who diligently protect their children from exposure to the media and commercialism must contend with this powerful cultural dynamic present in every American community.

Some parents are philosophically opposed to the idea that saying "no" to children is instructive or healthy. They may believe children deserve unlimited choices, or that children will learn how to make choices in the world without guidance. They may wish to protect their children, for as long as possible, from the limits of a harsh world. Or they may adamantly believe saying "no" is "mean", based on a child's understandable upset in reaction to limits.

Other parents intuitively sense saying "no" is in the best interest of children, but find it difficult, if not impossible, to do. Those with gentle personalities usually struggle to find a firm voice. Some are exhausted by modern life and cannot muster the stamina limit setting demands. Others wrangle with guilt over not having enough time with their children, and are reluctant to face the struggles inherent in the process of limit setting. Some are wrought by the anxiety many new parents face concerning whether it is the "right" thing to do.

Yet it *is* the right thing to do. Ultimately it is an act of love when parents teach their children at a young age fundamental messages about the limits of the world, because it is taught in the safety and shelter of home, by the people who care most. These children develop a strong, settled place within themselves that has learned to respect “no” and all it means. They can then accept limits without undue protest from teachers, other authority figures, and from the world.

At best, limit setting should be a developmental process, starting at birth and continuing into young adulthood. Very young children learn “no” in fundamental matters such as napping, not hurting others, and speaking respectfully. These are then accepted as natural when children reach middle childhood. Parents can then address more complex limit setting issues such as completing chores, doing homework and working cooperatively on teams and in groups. When a solid foundation is laid in the early years, then the limit setting challenges of adolescence become a continuation of the process, rather than a contentious battlefield. Curfews, safety choices and driving limits are approached with teens who fundamentally understand the limitations of the world and the finality of the word “no.” There are tears and anguish throughout this process for both children and parents, but with inherent reward: the development of respectful, responsible young people.

Children who are not taught the meaning of “no” from their parents at a young age will inevitably face the difficulty of learning it outside the family. It is not a question of *whether* they will face it but *when* they will face it, and *by whom* will it be taught. When this developmental process is not taught in a gradual way at home, the learning becomes more abrupt and creates unnecessary stress and unhappiness for the child, his/her peers and the adults who must impose limits. These children have not developed that settled inner landscape that knows “no” and so, continue to seek what they do not have when they cannot have it, suffer considerably when their wishes are not realized, or may develop manipulative behaviors to avoid the finality of accepting “no.”

Let us consider two hypothetical young children, Mary and John, age five, whose class is preparing to sing and use percussion instruments to accompany a song. The teacher has given each child an instrument and, like many children, Mary and John did not receive the instrument they wanted. Both look very sad and reluctant to play their instrument. The teacher says “I know lots of people are disappointed they did not get the instrument they hoped for, but all the instruments are fun in their own way.” John, who is used to accepting limits at home, shrugs and starts to play the maracas. Within a few minutes he is happily engaged in the song and the group. Mary, who is unused to accepting limits set at home, continues to stay sad after the teacher has spoken, and pouts, saying “I don’t want to play the drum.” She cries, possibly loudly, and elicits sympathy from other children, but the teacher continues with the song. Soon everyone is happily engaged, focused on singing and playing, except Mary, who has refused to participate.

If we could peek into the minds of these two children, it would illustrate the gift of “no.” John has been given this gift in his young life and is familiar with the feeling of not getting what he wants. He knows, from experience, that disappointment passes, and that things will be easier for him if he lets go of what he wanted and accepts the reality before him. He might think “Oh, well, I wanted the drum, but the teacher said no and she means it. Maybe these maracas will be fun.” Mary has not had the benefit of “no” in

her life, and is not used to an adult consistently setting a limit. She is not familiar, like John, with the inner process of being disappointed and moving on. Mary might be thinking "If I stay sad, maybe the teacher will give me the cymbals" because adults in Mary's life usually give her what she wants if she waits long enough. But the teacher is different, and it will take many unhappy times and missed opportunities for Mary to learn this process of accepting disappointment and moving on.

Ostensibly, this example may not seem troubling, yet it is important to realize how difficult life can be for a child like Mary, who has not had basic training in accepting limits. Wherever Mary is, be it a public school, a Waldorf School, a daycare center or a picnic with her family, incidents like the one described could occur multiple times in a day. While John is available for all the other learning his environment is providing, Mary is delayed while she spends considerable time learning to accept the "no" of the world. If she is fortunate, she will learn it in her early years with the help of the world, and adults outside her family. If she is unfortunate, she will struggle her whole life with accepting limits, following rules and laws, and respecting authority.

Learning to give the gift

Some parents have the good fortune to come naturally to limit setting with their children and do not find saying "no" difficult or distressing. But for most of us, saying "no" requires a strength of will and a certainty of conviction we must painfully learn, develop and maintain in order to help our children. What follows are some ideas to help the "most of us" in the latter category, as we develop and maintain our ability to set limits.

- Develop an inner strength and conviction that saying "no" is the gift this article purports it to be. Although children protest (sometimes emphatically!) when we say "no," they need the safety and protection it offers and are often deeply reassured when we say it. Look beyond the tears and tantrums to the lesson of life being offered.
- Try to remain calm and abide in that calm when your child protests or throws a tantrum following the establishment of a limit. Develop an image or an idea that can give you strength when you need it. "Limits are like a loving hug" is an image/idea that has helped me tremendously. While my child or a child I am working with is protesting my "no," I visualize a large embrace of love and safety.
- Begin by saying "no" emphatically about small things of importance, and remain consistent in your resolve. Saying "no" is a muscle that can be exercised and strengthened over time. Keep practicing, and you should find it easier to be firm over increasingly complex matters and issues.
- Develop a repertoire of "no" phrases that are comfortable for you, particularly if you dislike the word itself. "People are not for hitting" works as well as "No hitting." Some other ideas: "we do not do that in our family"; "I cannot let you do that"; "I do not expect you to understand, but I expect you to do what I am asking" ; "I wish you wouldn't...."

- Find the support of at least one other parent who says “no” and shares your values in limit setting. When your children are young, this might mean a fellow parent who values an early, consistent bedtime; in middle childhood, someone who does not allow “R” movies; in adolescence, a parent who insists on curfews. Call this parent when faced with a limit-setting challenge to get support for a decision.

Giving the gift of “no” takes foresight and maturity. It is a gift we give our children when they are too young to understand, whose value they grow to understand only in their adulthood. Children come to understand the gift through the repetition of our giving and their acceptance in receiving time after time, through childhood. When limits are truly received, accepted and learned, all of society is strengthened by young adults who are prepared to be responsible citizens.

* * *

Helene McGlaulin, MEd, LCPC is a counselor, educator and writer of non-fiction and poetry. She has worked in public education for twenty years as a teacher and counselor, and has written numerous articles and booklets about helping children through parenting, education and counseling. Helene lives with her husband and two teenagers in Bath, Maine.

This article will appear in the Spring 2004 issue of *Renewal*. Used with permission.

Helene McGlaulin
1033 Washington St
Bath, Maine 04530
207-443-2722
mcglaulinh@link75.org