

The Gift of *No*

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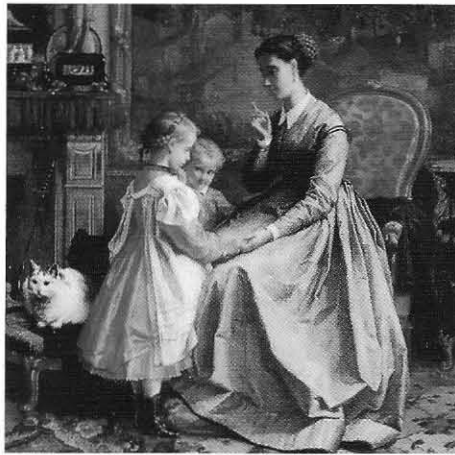
The word *No* suggests limits, control, rejection, and finality. It is hard to see how this most simple and powerful expression of the negative can be a gift—an expression of concern and favor, an offer of assistance. But for parents, saying *No*, when done judiciously and appropriately, is a gift that their children need and deserve. It enables them to grow into responsible, balanced adults.

Every child must learn to live with the limitations of life in the world. There are societal rules that must be observed, unsafe acts that should be avoided, types of behavior that cannot be tolerated, chores that must eventually be done. To be a mature and responsible human being means to accept and cope with the natural limits life brings.

The gift of *No* teaches children they cannot have everything they want when they want it. It says, "You must consider other people and your environment 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."

Nevertheless, saying *No* to our children and consistently following through on limits are among the hardest parenting skills to recognize, learn, and master. It is an art to use *No* wisely, to consciously avoid the danger of being overly restrictive and punitive and to be willing to discipline when necessary. There is an increasing confusion among parents today 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.

In North American culture today, choices and the freedom to choose are highly valued. An abundance of choices is apparent everywhere, from the supermarket to the arena of national politics, creating the illusion of limitless bounty and acquisition. Even limit-setting parents who diligently protect their children from exposure to the media and commercialism must contend with this ubiquitous and powerful cultural dynamic.



Even in nineteenth-century France, children had to be told No. The Naughty Girl, by L.F. Lanfant de Metz (1814–1892)

Some parents reject, on philosophic grounds, the idea that saying *No* to children can be instructive or healthy. They may believe children deserve unlimited choices or that children will learn how to make the right choices in the world without external guidance. They may wish to protect their children from the limits of a harsh world for as long as possible. Or they may adamantly believe saying *No* is mean, since children typically become upset when behaviors are not permitted and wishes are not fulfilled.

Other parents intuitively sense that saying *No* is in the best interest of children but find it difficult, perhaps impossible, to do. Those with gentle personalities do not easily find a firm voice. Some are exhausted by modern life and cannot muster the stamina that limit-setting demands. Other parents are troubled by guilt about not spending enough time with their children and are reluctant to face the struggles inherent in the process of limit-setting. Some are overcome by the anxiety new parents typically face about whether it is the "right" thing to do for a child.

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. The children learn an indispensable life lesson in the safety and shelter of their home by those who care most about them. These children develop a strong, settled place within themselves that respects *No* and all it means. They can then, without undue

protest, accept limits from teachers, other authority figures, and from the world.

Setting limits should be a continuous process that starts soon after birth and continues into young adulthood. Very young children can experience the meaning of *No* in fundamental matters such as behavior toward others (not hitting or hurting), speaking respectfully to playmates and adults, and accepting the rhythm of the day—naps, mealtimes, and so on. If they are lovingly subjected to and learn about limits in these areas at an early age, they will accept them in later childhood as a matter of course.

With older children, parents can address limit-setting in more complex areas, such as completing chores, doing homework, and working cooperatively on teams and in groups. When a solid foundation has been laid in the early years, then the limit-setting during adolescence is simply a continuation of the process and less likely to become a battlefield. Curfews, decisions about what is safe and what is not, and limits on automobile use are approached with teens who fundamentally understand the limitations of the world and the finality of the word *No*. There are inevitably tears and anguish throughout this process for both children and parents, but with an 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 it will be taught. When this learning process does not take place in a gradual way in the home, it will take place abruptly in the outside world and will involve unnecessary stress and unhappiness for the child, for his peers,

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and for the adults who must impose limits. A child who has not developed the ability to accept a *No* continues to seek what he wants when he cannot have it, suffers considerably when his wishes are not realized, and may use manipulative behaviors to bypass the finality of a *No*.

Consider two (hypothetical) children, Mary and John, both aged six, in a kindergarten class that is

preparing to use percussion instruments to accompany a song. The teacher has given each child an instrument, and both Mary and John, along with other children in the class, do not receive the instrument they want. Both look very sad and seem reluctant to play their instrument.



A child being told No often resorts to a tantrum. A pen and ink drawing by Rembrandt, 1635

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 singing the song with the rest of the children. Mary, unused to accepting limits set at home, remains disappointed after the teacher has spoken. She pouts, saying, “I don’t want to play the drum,” then breaks into tears as the teacher continues with the song. Soon everyone is happily engaged, focused on singing and playing, except Mary, who has refused to participate.

The reactions of these two children illustrate the gift of *No*. John has been given this gift in his early years 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 says to himself, “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 setting limits on what she may have and what she may do. She is not familiar, as John is, with the inner process of being disappointed and moving on. Mary is thinking, “If I stay sad, maybe

the teacher will give me the cymbals.” Other 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.

It is important to realize how difficult life can be for a child like Mary, who has not had basic training in accepting limits. Whether she is at school, visiting a friend’s home, or with relatives, incidents like the one described will occur. Several or many times a day, Mary will miss out on the learning and fun her environment can provide her, because she cannot accept the *No* of the world. She will spend considerable time and energy learning to accept this *No*. If she is fortunate, she will learn it in childhood and adolescence 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 that we must painfully learn, develop, and maintain. What follows are ideas to help the “most of us” in the latter category as we develop and maintain our ability to set limits:

- Develop a strong conviction that saying *No* is in fact a gift that benefits our children. Although children protest—sometimes vehemently—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.

- 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 do not change your mind or give in. Saying *No* is a muscle that can be exercised and strengthened over time. Keep practicing, and you will 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.” Others include: “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 as a support another 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 advice and support.

Giving the gift of *No* takes foresight and maturity. It is a gift that we give our children when they are too young to understand, a gift the value of which they will appreciate only in their adulthood. Children come to understand the gift through the repetition of our giving and their acceptance in receiving it time after time through childhood. When limits are truly received, accepted, and learned, all of society is benefited by the young adults who are prepared to be responsible citizens. ☺

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Sooner or later, every child needs to learn that he or she cannot have everything.