



Making “No” Easier: The Power of Maybe

Your child: Mommy, I want... (this, that, the other thing).

You: No

Your child: Please.....

You: I said no!

Your child: It’s not fair! (Stomp, stomp, door slam).

Sound familiar?

How nice it would be if “no” were all it took: “Okay, Mommy, what ever you say.”

Back to reality...

When the answer is “no” (and it isn’t always), there are some strategies you can use to make it easier. And, hopefully avoid the temper tantrum and door slamming in the process.

First, make sure that it really is “No!”

Often, we forget that “maybe” is an okay answer. Think of “maybe” as a breather. Of course, “maybe” can eventually turn into a “no”, but it can also turn into a “yes.” So only use the “maybe” if there is a chance that you could decide “yes.”

Your child: Mom, can I stay up an hour late tonight to watch a special on TV?

Now is the time to think to yourself: what are my no/maybe/yes criteria?

Usually, “no’s” fall into one of the following categories:

1. It’s unsafe
2. It’s hurtful to someone
3. It’s too expensive
4. It goes against the values of our family
5. It’s something that has already been taken away as punishment.

If it doesn’t fall into one of these categories, then it’s a “yes” (that’s easy!) or a “maybe.”

“Maybes” can be:

1. Am I too tired to make a decision?
2. Am I too busy to make a decision?
3. Is there something that needs to happen before I can say “yes?”

Your child: Mom, can I stay up an hour late tonight to watch a TV special?

You: I’m too busy right now to think about it. But while I’m cooking dinner, you go off and come up with your best reasons why this should happen. Think about all the things that I’m going to ask you. Have you finished your homework? Will you be able to get up in the morning without me nagging? What else? Make your best case. We can talk about it during dinner.

Your child: I don’t want to do that! Can’t you just tell me now?!

You: Well, if you ask for a decision now, it's going to be a "no". If you want a "maybe", this is your choice. It's up to you.

Your child: All right. (Eyeballs roll. But that's better than door slam, right?)

Not only does the "maybe" buy you time....

....but it offers your child a chance to think critically and feel a part of the decision making process. In the end, you are the **decision maker**. But your child has a right to be heard. And, you have a responsibility as the decision maker to listen. You could still decide that it isn't safe. Or fair. Or affordable. But you've given your child a chance to feel empowered. But only give the "maybe" option if you could see yourself saying "yes."

But what if the answer really is "no?"

In an attempt to stave off the tantrum, adults tend to focus on the "why" behind the no instead of acknowledging the child's desire and validating the feeling that hearing "no" creates.

Acknowledge the desire:

Whether it's reasonable to our adult mind or not, the desire to the child is very real. Their very existence has boiled down to watching that TV special.

"It's a horrible show!" you think to yourself. "Who cares?!"

Your child cares. Take time to acknowledge this. It can be as simple as saying, "I can see this is very important to you."

Validate the feeling that hearing "no" creates:

No one likes to hear "no." Think about it. You're at work. You ask your co-worker for a favor. He doesn't want to do it. He could have a good reason (or a not so good one). A good reason can temper the reaction to "no." But there still is that niggling thought, "I wish he had said yes."

The same is true for your child! You can say no and have it mean no, but still validate that they will be sad or frustrated with that response. This is normal. Telling your child that it's okay to feel sad, that you understand, does not in any way dilute your "no."

Offering choices and distracting:

Another strategy is to follow your "no," acknowledgement and validation with choices or distraction. Here's are examples of the exchange without and then with the new parenting tools:

Scenario 1:

Your child: Mommy, I want my candy!

You: No. It's too close to dinner.

Your child: It's not fair!

You: I said "no."

Your child: But I promise I'll eat my dinner.

You: I said no!

Your child: (Whine. Yell)

You: (Whine. Yell)

Your child: (Stomp. Whine. Yell. Door slam)

Scenario 2:

Your child: Mommy, I want my candy!

You: [smile] I know. That candy tastes sooo good, doesn't it? No wonder you want it now!

Your child: So can I have it?

You: It's too close to dinner now. I know it's very hard to wait. But if you want to pick a piece for later, we can put it on the dinner table for dessert.

This still doesn't mean that your child will be thrilled with your response. But acknowledging the desire (with humor helps), validating the feeling, and then attempting the distraction, can make "no" much easier for both of you. And in the end, you've also taught a lesson about negotiation and compromise.