

Three Common Parenting Traps

1. The Escalation Trap

The escalation trap can happen in two different ways. The first is when the child escalates. Perhaps your child wants something—a candy bar or to play a video game. You tell him, “No, it’s too close to dinner,” or “You’ve already used up your screen time for today.” The child responds with whining, begging or even a tantrum, and he keeps it up until you’re worn down and you eventually give in, thinking to yourself that you’ll do anything to stop the whining.

What your child has learned is that the way he gets the candy or the game time is by getting louder, having a bigger tantrum, whining more, crying more. This learning increases the chances that next time he encounters a “no” and is frustrated, he will likely try that same strategy again.

The escalation trap also happens in the other direction. Sometimes it’s a child teaching a parent that she will only respond after the parent escalates. The classic example is where you say, “Okay, kids, it’s time to wash up for dinner.” They’re watching TV, and they do nothing. So a few minutes later you come back and you say, a little louder, “I said it’s time to come in for dinner!” Maybe they say, “Okay in a few minutes,” but a few minutes later they’re still not at the dinner table. The third time you are visibly angry, and you order them into dinner, probably shouting, and that’s when they finally come in. They know that they don’t really have to move until you raise your voice.

The problem here is that you’re learning that the only way to get them to do what you want them to do is to yell. And they’re learning that the first time you say something it doesn’t really count. Mom or Dad don’t really mean it unless they’re shouting.

What to do

Avoiding escalation requires sticking to your guns and remaining calm while doing so. If you said no to a child’s request, your goal is to ignore behavior directed at getting you to change your mind. It’s not easy, but it’s an investment in reducing that behavior in the future. When the child stops acting up and goes back to playing quietly or speaking in a calm tone of voice, be ready with positive reinforcement. “I like the way you calmed down,” or “It’s so nice when you speak to me this way.”

The same is true if you’re making a request and your child is ignoring you. You can repeat your request once, but without escalating, and let her know that a consequence will follow if you don’t get results. “I said it’s time for dinner; if you don’t come wash up, you’re going to lose 10 minutes of screen time after dinner.” And when she does comply, be ready with the praise, even if you had to ask twice.

2. The 'It's Just a Phase' Trap

Another trap that parents fall into is when you notice behavior that's problematic, you hope (naturally) that it will go away on its own, and so you don't respond. You think, "*It's just a phase,*" minimizing the behavior so you won't have to address it.

For instance, maybe your toddler is being aggressive on play dates. You think, "Surely this is just some kind of passing developmental thing—this is what kids do."

It very well may be that your child will eventually stop engaging in problematic behavior—hitting or pushing or grabbing. However, the way you and others respond to it may be the key to how quickly it goes away. If children test the limits of those around them, and no one intervenes, they learn that this kind of behavior is acceptable, or even that it gets them attention (however negative). That kind of learning is very important in young children, and it gets harder to undo as kids get older.

What to do

All toddlers are going to hit and bite and take toys away—they're exploring these as new behaviors. But it's important that you respond in a way that lets them know what's off limits—think of the behavior as an experiment by the child and you're providing the result to the toddler's experiment. Setting limits, coupled with praise as often as possible when the child *doesn't* engage in the problematic behavior, can help you manage these behaviors as they pop up.

3. The 'You Do This on Purpose' Trap

This is interpreting a child's behavior as something done intentionally to annoy or otherwise tax you, the parent. For instance, you tell your child it's time to stop playing and get ready to leave to go to Grandma's house. When you come back 10 minutes later, he's still playing. You hear yourself say, "I told you to get ready to go to Grandma's house, and you knew that this was important to me and you didn't do it. And you are doing this deliberately to annoy me."

The danger here is that if you think a child is doing something intentionally to bother you or hurt you, you're going to respond a lot differently than if you see it as a behavior that isn't about you. Maybe the child is having difficulty emotionally, or doesn't have well-developed coping strategies to conquer anxiety he has about being away from home. Or, most likely, he just made a mistake. There are dozens of possible reasons for why the behavior is occurring, the least likely of which is that it is intentionally done to bother you. If you think the behavior is intended to push your buttons, you're more likely to respond with negative emotion, rather than responding in a calm way and thinking about how to discourage the behavior in the future or support your

child through difficult tasks. It will also be harder to praise the behaviors you *do* want to see if you're angry at your child.

What to do

First of all, take the word "manipulative," in reference to your kids, out of your vocabulary. There's nothing positive that will come from thinking of your children as the masterminds and yourself as the victim. When your kids are acting out, try to remember that they haven't developed adult self-control. Throwing a tantrum is usually less calculated than it is desperate. You want to muster as much insight as you can into how the behavior may have developed and what function the behavior serves for the child. This will be a way to maintain a cool head and then plan how you'd like to respond in an effective way.