

Handy Phrases for Parents by Betsy Mann

Do you ever think of what you wish you'd said to your children ... after the moment's gone by? Here are a few good lines that could come in handy for parents and other caregivers. These phrases give children a model of how to clearly assert one's position in a respectful way. At the same time, they encourage the development of problem-solving skills and build self-esteem. Best of all, they are words you won't mind hearing when your child uses them back to you.

Planning for improvement

Faced with misbehavior, parents often ask the question, "Why did you do that?" (Depending on the tone of voice, this may sound to the child like an attack: "How could you have been so stupid/inconsiderate/disrespectful?") The question "Why?" directs the child's attention to defending his or her past actions. By asking instead, "How could you avoid this happening again next time?" you put the emphasis on making a plan to do a better job in the future.

Taking the pressure off

Children often spring requests on you when they know you're in a rush. They hope you'll say yes, just to avoid a long discussion. Don't get trapped into making a snap decision about something you really haven't considered before. You can say, "This is something I have to think about. I'll let you know later." If the decision has to be made right away, of course, later will be too late. They will learn to ask you earlier next time.

Teaching decision-making

When children are young, you can start letting them in on the process you go through to make up your mind about their requests. Take them through the advantages and disadvantages of different possibilities and explain what's behind your decisions. Don't expect them to agree with you, but at least they'll see you have a method. As they become familiar with the process, they can do it themselves. Then when they ask to do something, you can say, "Convince me this is a good idea," and eventually, when they're older, "I need to know your plan."

Keeping on topic

Does your child say, "You never buy me anything I want," when all you did was refuse to buy one more video game? Learn to short circuit arguments by refocusing the discussion in the present: "That might be, but we're talking about just one thing now." Children can also use this technique to divert your attention away from misbehavior and towards whatever subject they know will hook you into talking. Have you ever heard, "You don't love me as much as my brother."? Avoid getting distracted by saying, "Right now the subject is what just happened. We'll talk about love another time."

Overcoming discouragement

When a discouraged child says, "I can't do this; I'm just no good." the parent reflex kicks in: "Of course you can. Just try harder." Or perhaps, "Poor thing let me help you." A more helpful response might be to acknowledge the feeling and propose a strategy to break an overwhelming task into smaller pieces: "This isn't easy for you. What part of it might you be able to do?" For instance, if your preschooler can't do up her zipper, could she pull it the rest of the way once you've started it?

Offering support

Although we may try to give children choices in their daily activities, some things are not negotiable. Even if vaccinations are painful, they have to be given; even if her children will miss her, Mommy has to go on her business trip. Instead of pretending it won't hurt, or saying something like, "Life is tough, get used to it," try an approach that is both firm and supportive: "I know you're not looking forward to this. What could we do to make you more comfortable?" Together you might develop a plan that involves bringing a favorite stuffed toy and sitting on Daddy's lap at the doctor's, or making a photo album to look at while Mom's away.

Showing appreciation

People, children included, like to feel they're appreciated, even for the things they do routinely. Be sure your repertoire of handy phrases includes, "Thank you. That really helps me out." If you let your children know that you notice the things they do right, in time, you may even hear them thanking you back.