

From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy



— Situation —

I am having a problem with my three, nearly four year old son. He loves to play at his friend's house or have his friend over to play. The problem is that my son throws a complete fit when he has to leave his friend's house, or if it is time for his friend to leave our house. He yells, kicks, and throws himself to the ground. I end up carrying him off screaming (me as well as him!).

It seems when he is told "no" for whatever reason, he gets really mad and starts stomping his feet and yelling at my husband or me and throws a huge tantrum. I have tried to reason with him on a number of occasions, but it doesn't seem to be working. How can we avoid these outbursts?

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— Solution —

Your son does not want to quit playing, leave his friend's house, or have his friend leave his house. The word "no" almost guarantees a struggle. No matter what you do, your son may still throw a tantrum. Avoiding his tantrum is less important than managing not to throw one of your own. There are things that will help both of you. Practice preventive parenting, say "no" less often, and find ways to seek cooperation. Here's how:

Practice Preventive Parenting

- **Plan ahead.** Before allowing your son to go to his friend's house, discuss the expectations for leaving afterwards.
- **Involve him in the planning.** Ask him what needs to happen when you say it is time to leave.
- **Clarify expectations.** Tell him what you will do when it is time to leave. "I will gather up our things and head to the car. You may hold my hand or I will carry you."
- **Check it out.** Ask him to repeat what needs to happen when it is time to leave. "We hold hands when we go to the car." Congratulate him on responding accurately. He will enjoy feeling competent.
- **Do what you say you will do.** When time is up, gather up your coats, call to him, and head for the car. If he refuses, offer to hold his hand or carry him. Then do so. You might still end up carrying him while he resists, but it feels respectful to follow through on agreements. Stay calm.

*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

Now, at least, only one of you is screaming.

■ **Discuss unacceptable behavior.** Ask him what things are not okay to do if he does not want to leave. Continue asking him questions (resist telling him the answers). This allows him to feel empowered.

Giving appropriate power is the opposite of a power struggle.

■ **Practice the situation.** Consider role-playing leaving his friend's home, with each of you switching turns in the role of parent and child, with both appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Children usually find this lots of fun.

■ **Devise a private signal.** Decide on a signal to indicate when it is time to leave; humming a song, winking outrageously, or tugging at you earlobe. Make it fun!

Say "No" Less Often

A big key to changing your son's pattern of defiance and resistance in response to being told "no" is to learn to say "no" less often. When we examine most situations, the need to say "no" tends to evaporate.

■ **Anticipate problems.** A summons to leave the playground might meet with a request for "just one more time on the swing." Instead of responding with "no" after the fact, go back to preventive parenting. Before saying it is time to go, spend a moment asking him what toys he wants to play on before leaving. He lists them off and you agree to his plans, explaining that he has ten more minutes left to fit in those activities.

■ **Qualify your "yes" response.** If your son asks, "May I have a cookie now?" Instead of an abrupt "No!" try: "You may have a cookie right after lunch."

■ **Empower with limited choices.** Before entering the grocery store, offer your child some choices. "You may choose between juice, cookies, or fruit for today's treat." This works much better than battling over all the things he requests by responding with "no's."

Limited choices include only acceptable alternatives.

Seek Cooperation

The word "no" is only part of the problem. The broader issue involves power struggles. Stop focusing on what you are trying (not trying) to make him do or not do.

■ **Claim the problem as your own.** "I really don't like carrying you home from next door. I want to figure out a better way of ending play time and coming home."

■ **Ask for your son's help with a problem.** "Would you be willing to help me come up with a plan for solving this problem?"

■ **Invite your son to think through situations.** Ask him questions. If certain problems persist, talk them over with him. "I've noticed how upset we both get when it is time to quit playing. What can we do about this problem?" This invites him to be part of the solution. It demonstrates respect for his ability to solve problems and to change his behavior.

Children learn respectful behavior by experiencing it.

■ **Listen and share ideas.** Agree upon a plan that works for both of you. Children often come up with brilliant, unexpected, and creative solutions. If your son won't choose a solution, offer to choose one and ask him to agree to try it for the next week. Most children are willing to agree to a week or similarly short trial period.

As to your son's tantrums, quit worrying. He can choose to have a tantrum or not. Avoiding children's tantrums is not the goal of parenting. Sometimes young children just want things their way (don't we all?) and they are much less inhibited about letting us know how they feel.

Allow him to have his tantrum, making sure he is in a safe place when he does so (away from sharp table corners, hard surfaces, or tippy furniture.) Try to remain calm and give the tantrum as little attention as possible.

Do not throw your own tantrum. Breathe deeply and best of luck.

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