

Chapter 5: A Powerful Tool: Just Say No

Parents raising children who are truly grateful for everything they have been given, are consistently all using a very simple tool in their parental tool belt. They are saying, "No."

At one time or another, we have all witnessed a child at a store whining, nagging, crying, or all out stomping and dropping to the floor in hopes of getting something that they want. It could be anything that incites the scene: a pack of Skittles, the sugar coated-cereal with a plastic racecar inside that is guaranteed to last at least five days before breaking, a light-up keychain for the kid who doesn't have keys, Pokémon cards, a Star Wars guy with a better weapon than the one at home. The list is endless.

With the increase in disposable incomes after WWII as well as the arrival of seemingly harmless commercials into living rooms across America shortly thereafter, we have the very beginnings of the consumer train that has roared through the decades into the Target and Wal-Mart stores near you. Add to this the easy credit of the 1980's and a parent's need to be liked, and you have the recipe for disaster.

The solution, however, is quite simple. Just say, "No." As the parent, you know what is best. You know that their appetites for the stuff can be insatiable. You know making the purchase only appeases them for the moment. You know that whatever it is that they want will not make them happy for very long. You know that what the child really needs is more of you and less of the stuff. You know that buying it is the easy way out of the store for you, but only conditions them to ask again next time. You know.

Just say, "No." It's short and simple and to the point. Say it with confidence like you would say no if they asked you, "Can I build a fire out back and throw this aerosol can in it?" If you have randomly said yes in the past, then your child will have a lot more motivation to plead his case. At this point, he still has hope that it might pay off to badger. It will take more time for him to

recognize the word “no” in your vocabulary, so he may need to be physically removed from the coveted object or perhaps even the store itself. Don’t repeat the word “no.” Just leave. Have no fear—this will only be a temporary situation while the child is reacquainted with the new sheriff in town.

Variations of “no” that don’t work

- Rather than a firm “no,” some parents prefer the weaker version of “We can’t afford that now.” This is simply not true. If you have a credit card in your wallet, then you probably could buy every toy in whatever aisle you are in. You could buy boxes of Hershey bars and every flavor of Five gum. And then you would simply return home to the Visa bill in the mailbox and a little more debt for the family. Give your child the security of knowing that you *could* buy the object, but that is not part of your family’s plan for your money.
- “Maybe later,” “Not today,” “I need to think about that.” All of these responses delay the problem for another day. These answers give them hope that perhaps the conditions just weren’t right for their request to be granted, but NEXT time they might have success. These responses work in the moment, but they fail to present your strength on where you stand about the acquisition of stuff. The subtle message is that you wish you could buy it, but for some reason unbeknownst to them, you just can’t.
- “That’s too expensive. Pick something else out.” In the toy boutique industry, the term is “Shut-up Toys.” These are toys priced at \$10 or less that are placed seductively around the cash register. These are the lifeboats for parents who want to say yes to their child, but the toy that the child first wanted is just too much money. They feel like they have said no to the large ticket item and that buying something smaller is harmless. However, that lifeboat

has a hole in it because it only serves to reward the child with stuff and only feeds the appetite for more of it next time. The child has indeed “shut-up,” but they have been encouraged to scream another day.

Variations of “no” that can work

- “Do you want to put it on your list?” As discussed earlier, having each member of the family have his own list for optional purchases is the perfect way to cultivate financial discernment. Each time money is spent, it must take thought and not be impulsive. Asking it as a question to the child allows them to consider if the item is even worthy enough to be put on the list. Many times when I have asked this question to one of my boys, he has looked at the object more and then said, “No, never mind.” Which means, “I can’t believe I even asked because this thing’s not even worth taking the time to write down.” For a time, one of the boys had “an ice pick” on his list. (Scratched off 15 days later.)
- “Do you have enough of your allowance saved for that?” Once you have explained to your child that you will provide them with everything they need and even some of what they want, the allowance is the perfect way for children to provide for themselves what they really want. Very quickly parents see that it is much easier for a child to spend a parent’s money rather than his own.
- “Maybe Grandma needs a birthday/Christmas gift idea for you.” I always love to be able to see the thrill in Grandma’s eyes when she buys the perfect gift. The perfect gift is always small, useful, and much anticipated. If left without ideas, our Grandma has been known to purchase two 8-foot tall American flag tepees, a stuffed dog larger than a labradoodle, and a candle making kit that ended

up starting a kitchen fire. Giving Grandma the best gift ideas is a win-win for me. I get to see my boys open a present that they truly have decided is special to them and unchecked contraband stays out of my house.

- “Would you like to hold this while I shop and then give it back?”
This variation was an all time favorite of mine when the boys were still sitting in the shopping cart seat. I admitted to the allure of the object and used its powers to my benefit. The child would be absorbed in the newness of the object and all the fascination it possessed, and I shopped without disturbance. Once safely through the checkout line, the object will be returned to the clerk as promised, and the child will either accept that or start screaming. A screaming child is now, however, conveniently located near the exit doors for a speedy removal from the store.

Shopping with four boys had been without incident until a warm day in June of 2009. That was the day that I realized my radar had failed to pick up the storm clouds that I should have seen brewing. That was the day that six-year old Matthew asked his biggest brother, “Michael, what are you going to buy me today?”

Michael innocently responded, “Oh Matthew, I don’t have any money with me today.” As if on cue, Matthew dropped to the ground and shrieked, then convulsed in a heap of anger, frustration, and disbelief. It was then that I realized what had been happening over the last month or so. Michael, who is a spender by nature, had been getting a lot of joy from buying his little brother little treats at Target. A pack of Juicy Fruit here, a box of Gobstoppers there. Not every trip, but enough to set an expectation.

I stood over Matthew’s sobbing body and called all the other boys to gather around. “Do you see this? Do you understand what this is? Do you know

how this happened?" Michael bowed his head with the reality of the situation. "This!" I continued with my right hand outstretched toward the heap on the floor for good measure, "This is why I never bought you guys stuff when you were little. This is a boy who used to be happy when we shopped. This is a boy who is now miserable because of his expectation for buying more stuff."

Matthew ended up dusting himself off and moving on, and Michael started giving his brother extra-cool birthday and Christmas presents as well as a few treats more sporadically at home.

If your children are still young enough or sheltered enough to not beg for "the stuff," be sure that you continue to be in charge of what gets placed in your cart. By never starting the habit of buying a "treat" or worse yet "a surprise if you're good," you will insure a minimally disruptive trip to the store. Rewarding (bribing) kids for being good at the store with a treat is a problem in two areas. First, bribing for good behavior begins the conditioning of getting a treat every time a store is entered. Like Pavlov's dog, some kids begin to salivate when the automatic doors open. Second, bribing minimizes your role as the parent to a dispenser of rewards and punishments. Kids should "be good" at the store because that is what you asked them to do. That is the right thing to do.

As you transition from a bad habit you may have already started, you can "celebrate" a job well done rather than bribing. It sounds different than a bribe because YOU are in charge rather than the child. In a bribe, the child can decide if the treat is worth it or if running around, begging, and throwing stuff on the floor sounds like more fun. "If you're good, you can get a treat when we're done (a..k.a. I have no power; you decide what you want to do. I'll try to trick you into what I want.)"

By "celebrating," you say to the child, "We need to get a few things at the store today. If we can get through there without running, whining, arguing, and pulling things off the shelves, we will have enough time to go to the park. If I am distracted by your behavior, there just won't be enough time." Now YOU as the parent are in charge.

By children not having expectations for toys or treats, an added bonus to peaceful shopping is the joy of giving abundance. Because you have done your homework and said no with regularity, you are in a position to give your kids a real treat. About every other month or so, I'll buy the kids a giant Icee to split with a brother or open a box of ice cream bars that I just bought. "Wow, Mom! Thanks. This is awesome!" They are thrilled with something as simple as ½ of an Icee or a .25 cent ice cream bar.

If you have started this book and realize that you have already created habits that are making it difficult for your children to be grateful for what they already have, don't condemn yourself for yesterday. TODAY you can begin. TODAY you can sit them down and tell them, "I've noticed that it is difficult for us to go into a store and have a pleasant experience. This isn't good for you or me, and it won't serve you well as an adult."

Practice Shopping

During a season when the boys were starting to slack in their ability to get through a store without difficulty, my husband and I set aside a weekend to practice shopping. Rather than doing the easier version, which would be leaving them home, we decided to practice. Being able to take your children with you to do mundane tasks is important to your freedom as well as important for their learning to be knowledgeable consumers and patient children.

Early one Saturday morning we explained to the four boys that it was getting to be an unpleasant experience to take them into stores with us. We told them this was a task that they must need more practice doing in order to master it. We practiced in basketball. We practiced in handwriting. It was time to practice shopping. After outlining both appropriate and inappropriate behavior, we proceeded to run errands to five stores. We explained we had enough errands that we could go all day and on to the next if it took them that long to catch on. They caught on.

Start saying "no" to demands for stuff and "yes" to time that you make for them when they are not asking for it. Pull up a chair after school and really listen to their day or snuggle with them before bed listening to the highs and lows of

the day. Substituting time for stuff will make the transition away from the stuff much easier.

Finally, if you do want to buy them something from the store for no specific occasion like a new puzzle, bubbles, pool toy, or book, either tell them you need their help to pick it out before you go in, or buy it secretly and give it to them at home as a surprise. As long as you are in charge and are not manipulated by your child, they will quickly learn to be grateful for every thing that you do decide to buy them.