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Conquer the Whining War

Simple strategies that really work to stop the complaining.

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Nothing can drive a person batty, or wear them down, like a whining child. Many a desperate parent has tried to beg, threaten, punish, appease or even trick a child to cease the snivels and cries. But, these tactics rarely work. When they do, their success is short lived.

Once you understand why children whine, and how your reactions to children may actually fuel this problematic behavior, you can eliminate it.

Why do children whine? Sometimes children feel they are being ignored, tuned out or responded to in an automatic way. When this happens, they adopt a strategy of whining, pleading, having tantrums and doing other demanding behaviors simply to get your attention.

As soon as the whining starts, try this: Get down at eye level with your child to communicate. By making yourself physically smaller, you appear less intimidating and ease anxiety your child might harbor in talking to you.

Next, listen to what your child wants, and mirror his words and feelings back to him. If your child says "I'm hungry," respond with "So the old belly is growling, is it? What would you like to eat?" This makes a child feel that you are truly listening and you care to respond to his needs.

If your child asks for something you consider to be bad for him, validate what he said to you, while explaining why you cannot fulfill his request. For instance, suppose your child says "I'm hungry. I want some candy." Say something like "Candy sure is yummy, but I can't give you any now. I don't want to spoil your lunch."

Try not to be arbitrary in denying your child's requests out of habit or convenience. Assess if a "no" is in fact necessary. If it is, could you ease your child's disappointment by offering an alternative or giving him some choices? Try: "I don't want you to spoil your lunch. How about a piece of fruit now, and a piece of candy after you eat your sandwich? Do you want an apple or an orange?"

Children also whine if they see other children complaining, and the tactic appears to get them what they want. If you want to eliminate whining from being a weapon your child uses against you, then you need to take steps to make it ineffective.

Strategies to Stamp Out Whining

•Be clear, specific and certain when you answer your child's questions and weigh his requests. Avoid using phrases like "maybe later" or "I'll think about it." By not uttering such phrases, you stamp out opportunities for your child to keep pressuring you to get his way.

•Ignore all whining, tantrum-throwing, arguing, pleading, deal-making and other demanding behaviors you want to eliminate. Don't cave in and let your child win.

•Only intervene in a child's behavior if it becomes destructive or violent. If that should happen, give your child a time out. Be sure to use this strategy with absolute certainty and predictability every single time your child's actions become extreme. Do not lecture before, during or after a time out. This ruins its effectiveness.

•Move forward when your child's behavior improves. Don't revisit past arguments, lecture or list future dos and don'ts. Instead, engage your child in a normal conversation and activities and focus on what you are doing next, whether you plan to run an errand or go to a birthday party.

•Walk away during public tantrums. With small children, retreat to a nearby neutral place where you can still keep an eye on the child. For older children, go to the car. Don't plead, threaten or argue. Just make the quiet and obvious statement that you do not engage in public arguments by walking away.

If you try these strategies and your child's behavior worsens, avoid being discouraged or giving up. According to psychologist Dr. Randy Cale, this is a natural reaction. Your child is hanging on for dear life to his past bad habits because they once got him the attention he craves. If you persevere for 30 days, you will see improvements in your child's behavior. The key to stopping whimpers and complaints in their tracks is to continue being an active listener and to apply these strategies regularly, without fail.

Irene Helen Zundel is a freelance writer of magazine articles and a publisher of an educational newsletter. She primarily writes about child development, education, parenting and homemaking.

For more information, try the following resources

Books:

- Win the Whining War & Other Skirmishes: A Family Peace Plan* (Perspective Publishing) by Cynthia Whitham
- Whining: 3 Steps to Stopping it Before the Tears and Tantrums Start* (Fireside) by Audrey Ricker and Carolyn Crowder
- Say Goodbye to Whining, Complaining and Bad Attitudes...in you and your kids!* (Harold Shaw Publishing) by Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller
- Guiding Young Children: A Child-Centered Approach* (Mayfield Publications) by Eleanor Reynolds

Web sites:

- Terrific Parenting, www.terrificparenting.com
- Early Childhood, www.earlychildhood.com
- Parenting the Preschooler, University of Wisconsin Extension, www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/pp