

Can you get your kids to say “yes” and mean it?

by Linda Ferguson

There’s an old saying: “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” You might suspect that the same thing holds true for children. Whether they are toddlers or high school students, you can make your kids say yes. But if you force an issue to get apparent agreement, you might be setting yourself up for more conflict. A child convinced against his will is likely to revert to what they really want sooner rather than later.

The fall is a great time to think about the difficulties of getting a real yes from your kids. Whether the subject is lunches or bedtimes, parents and kids often have very different ideas and it can be hard to get them to agree to what you know is best for them and for you. Here is a four step process that will get you to a genuine yes when it counts.

1. Find opportunities to say “yes” to your kids. This doesn’t mean giving up the fight; it does mean becoming aware of all the things they want that you want for them and saying yes whenever you can genuinely say yes. Kids have a very finely tuned sense of fair play: if you agree with them, they are more likely to look for ways to agree with you. Or maybe they’ll just get used to being in agreement and be motivated to stay in agreement when you need a yes. Either way, saying yes to them moves them a step closer to saying yes to you.
2. Get in sync. Your kids have a rhythm and it’s likely to be different from yours. They think and move at a different pace. Observe them closely enough so that you can adjust your pace to theirs: listen for the rhythm in their voice and track their gestures, their walk and even their fidgets. When you get very attuned to their rhythm, you will find that you can breathe and blink in sync with them. This kind of supportive attention is addictive: it will feel so good to them that they will have real incentive to stay in agreement so they can stay in sync with you.
3. After you have said yes and adjusted your rhythm, you will have a new perspective on what it is like to be your kid. Jump in all the way now and imagine that you are your kid in the situation where you want them to say yes. Check out your new insights with your kid; just report the differences you notice and find out if you are accurate. Say things like “it seems to me you might be feeling this way” or “when I look at it the way you do I notice. . .”.
4. Take baby steps. Don’t expect to go from No to Yes in just one jump. Find the common ground between what they want and what you want and lead them a little at a time to see why you want or need them to say yes. If you move too fast, you’ll spook them - but don’t worry, you can go back to the first three steps and repeat as necessary.

You might find it takes more time than you would like to get a genuine yes from your kids. It will sometimes seem easier just to force the issue and impose a yes. That’s possible, of course, but it is a short term solution that can have longer term implications. Kids always know the difference between the times they agree with you and the times you made them agree. If you need them to own the yes, you need to do the work to get there with them.

If you follow the steps listed here, consistently and honestly, your kids will want to say yes to you. Sometimes they will still disagree, but they won’t do it often and they won’t do it lightly. They’ll also feel connected enough to you to talk to you about differences and to keep the lines of communication open when that is even more important than just saying yes. You’ll know them better and you’ll enjoy them more. It’s a very good return on the time you invest in getting your kids to say yes and own the agreement.

