

Mother Nurture

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When Kids Can't Have What They Want

"Our 14-month-old, Sam, really gets mad when he can't do or have something he wants. He'll hold on tight to an object, and if we take it away, he will try to get it back and fuss a lot. I'm worried about frustrating him too much, but my mother tells me that kids just have to learn that they cannot always get what they want."

How to respond when the wants of parents and children differ is one of The Big Questions of parenting. Things usually go well when parents and kids want the same things -- problems start when they don't!

On the one hand, high levels of parental tolerance for and gratification of child wants are associated with high levels of child attachment, social competence, positive mood, and self-confidence.

On the other hand, parents have to be in charge. But studies show that a large proportion (sometimes half!) of all parental control behaviors with young children are idiosyncratic and unnecessary. The typical toddler experiences an average of roughly 20 restrictions of his or her wants per hour. How would you feel if someone got in the way of your wishes every three minutes, hour after hour, day by day?

Parental control is generally needed when child pursues a good goal in a bad way. Examples include pursuing pleasure by eating too much candy, or trying to learn about the world by sticking a knife into an electrical socket. The goal is fine, but the methods aren't so hot.

In these cases, how about offering an alternative way for the child to attain the positive goal? For example, if Sam shouldn't play with your sunglasses (or camera, electrical cords, bread knife, etc.), you could try to interest him in some other acceptable object or activity: "Uh-oh, not that buzzsaw again, Sam! Come here and see these neat blocks. Let's make a tower!"

Or you could change just the problematic element(s) in Sam's activities so that he can keep going safely (or neatly, quietly, etc.) with his basic plan. This could include shifting location (water play outside or in the bathtub), altering some feature of the object (a big plastic spoon instead of a metal one), or providing a new target (whacking something other than baby sister's head).

Research shows that offering alternatives to young children is likely to reduce both non-compliance and fussing. It also teaches children that their parents (or other caregivers) care about their wants, and that other options are often available.

The most effective approach to alternatives is generally as follows:

- Acknowledge that you know what their (problematic) want is. This lets a child know that his or her communication has been received (a good general principle!) and that your alternative doesn't come out of the blue.
- Communicate or do the "control" before offering the alternative (i.e. remove the knife before offering the spoons)
- Actively engage the child with the alternative, perhaps by playing with it yourself.

Alternatives will not work every time. Nor it is not always appropriate or possible to give an alternative. Sometimes we are just too tired or otherwise occupied. Depending on the age and developmental level of your child, you may want to really get across some point - especially if the problem is a safety issue -- before shifting the child's attention to something new. And as kids get older, they can, will, and need to take more responsibility for generating their own alternatives.

So even when you try hard to offer alternatives, there will be plenty of little opportunities for Sam to learn that life has its limits and he won't always get what he wants. But especially in early childhood, the emphasis should be on gratifying child wants (sometimes in an alternative form) and giving children a deep sense of confidence in themselves and the world.

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