

How to Get a Young Child to Do What You Want Without Talking Yourself to Death

—Or—

Working with the Will of the Young Child

Nancy Blanning

*Y*oung children may seem logical and reasonable to us, but this really is not their primary mode of being. They live in their limbs, in movement, in forces of will.

When you really want a child to move into action, speaking to him or her can actually freeze the child into immobility. All the child's forces have to rush up to the head for thinking and nothing is left over for immediate movement.

Help your child to begin to move, literally, before you speak—take him by the hand or arm. Or if you must speak, say something like, "It is time for coats now," making a general statement instead of a command, while at the same time offering the coat.

Instead of reasoning with your child, try to tell an impromptu story about a similar situation. It is a rare child who is not instantly captivated by a story. As you tell the story, literally start a movement involving your child's limbs (e.g., put arms into the sleeves of the coat, hand her one block to put away in the basket as you do likewise to model what you want the child to do, etc.).

Do not ask your child a question unless it is really a choice. For example, when it is time to leave, many parents get into hot water by asking, "Are you ready to go?" instead of stating, "It is time to leave now."

Limit the choices you give your child. Unless your child is exceptionally aware of clothes choices, food preferences, and so on, children are usually grateful to be spared making a choice. You choose the clothes, or set the meal in front of the child with "Here's breakfast." Think of yourself in a situation where you have to make a lot of choices; it can be exhausting. It is even more so for a little child.

Set the "form" ahead of time. This means place the clothes for tomorrow out the night before, ready to be put on in the morning without having to make decisions about it—by either you or your child. Know what you will prepare for breakfast the next morning without asking what the family wants.

Remember that each adult responsibility you take care of for your child allows his or her energy to be available for growing. We do a child a great service by pre-thinking and pre-planning how things will happen—by creating a “form”—which will support both the child and ourselves, so there is order and predictability in our lives.

Please do not misunderstand that a parent should become a servant for the child. As parents, we are guides and teachers of the ways of the world. We want our children to do as much for themselves as they can, such as dressing, feeding, and simple chores. But we do need to create an environment in which the child can be successful, where there is a starting point, middle, and end, rather than leaving the child alone to figure it out.

The image of the child as our “apprentice” is helpful. In any trade or craft, the apprentice is always shown how to do a task, from the simplest beginning step. Then the task is built up step by step. Each time we give our children concrete, practical experience in how to physically do something, we are escorting them along the pathway to becoming a “master craftsman.”

These suggestions will help in many situations, but not all.

There will be times when you have to do battle. So choose your battles. Do not engage in a struggle of wills with your child unless you are committed to winning—not for your sake, but for the child’s. This means you must be on home ground where time is not an issue. The supermarket is not the place to choose to battle.

Before drawing battle lines, see if you can transform the task at hand by creating a story, making the task into a game, or by offering assistance. “These books are all scattered on the floor. They’ll be happier up on the shelf. Here’s one for you and I’ll help, too.” Or, “I bet I can pick up this pile of books faster than you can. Let’s race.” Or, “I’ll close my eyes and see if those books can jump back to their shelf without a sound.” A story could begin with, “Did I ever tell you about the time a big windstorm came into little bear’s bedroom and blew everything topsy-turvy?”

If you are in a battle with an older child, state clearly to your child what must happen in objective and matter-of-fact terms. “The dirty clothes need to be put in the hamper. We can wait until that is done.” Then leave. If your child also leaves the site of the task, guide him or her back and restate the above. Try to do so calmly without accusation or anger.

Remember, you, as the parent, are the child’s loving authority. Do not be afraid to claim that role. Your guidance will strengthen, not suppress, your child’s will. The child is reassured by a warm, confident adult who knows how things work in the world and who can show him or her the way. ♦