

Yes, you can get your kid to stop whining

By Nancy Samalin

When kids start whining, all you can think of is getting them to stop. Whining is like chalk scratching on a blackboard. It can drive the most even-tempered parent over the edge. But ordering a child to stop whining is about as effective as ordering an infant to stop crying.

Whining typically progresses in stages and it can become habitual, a rut. In order to climb out of it, you need to understand how you got there in the first place.

All whining isn't the same

Whining usually means one of three things: (1) children are trying to communicate with you, (2) they are trying to manipulate you, or (3) they whine so often they're no longer even aware of it.

A lot depends on a child's age. For toddlers, whining usually isn't deliberate. It's more like an advanced form of crying. And the reason it's so frustrating for parents is that, although we expect infants to cry, we assume that once children have learned words, they will use them. But most 2 and 3 year olds don't have a very well-developed sense of language. When tiredness and frustration overwhelm them, all they can manage is a cry of distress, which can come out as a whine.

As kids get older, if they learn that whining achieves results, they will use it to get attention, to get what they want, and to test their power over you—or sometimes all three.

Set a good example

Sometimes we don't realize how we sound, but we need to listen to ourselves. When we say the same things over and over again ("How many times do I have to ask you?" "Will you get moving?" "Hurry up, we're late."), it can sound an awful lot like we're whining too.

To avoid this, try using brief

neutral phrases to make your points, such as: "It's time to get up. Your cereal is ready." Single-word prompts can work well too: "Teeth." "Shoes." "Jacket."

Try role playing

Carol, a mother in one of my workshops, taught her 5-year-old son Harry to identify the difference between whining and asking—to help him gain more control over the way he expressed himself.

When he started to whine, Carol would say: "I only answer when you speak in your regular Harry voice, not in a whiny voice. Can you ask me in a way that makes me want to listen?"

The approach worked. In time, Harry learned how to ask for what he wanted without whining. When he occasionally slipped, Carol learned to say calmly, "Try it again in your regular voice."

Another way to get your point across is to change roles. You pretend to be your child, and your child pretends to be you.

Of course, if you try role playing, be careful to do it playfully, never sarcastically. Your goal is to teach, not to make fun of your child. Just be aware that when kids are truly overtired or hungry, they are not likely to appreciate humor.

Don't give in

Experienced whiners know how to wear parents down with their unrelenting pleas. But if your response is to do anything to stop the whining, you're letting your child know that it works. Firmly state: "This *no* is not going to turn into a *yes*."



Children learn quickly if whining works for them.

By paying careful attention to the circumstances, you can interpret the reasons for a child's distress and create alternative ways of handling different situations.

For example, if a 3 year old whines while you're getting her dressed, maybe you need to change your method. Some kids this age need more time and freedom to dress themselves. If a 4 year old get whiny in the early evening, maybe he needs a snack or some quiet time.

Recognize genuine needs

When children start out in a normal voice and then escalate to a whine, they may feel frustrated because you are ignoring their needs. When kids feel uncomfortable, tired, or simply want something

they can't have, they can become intense and emotional. If your child continues to whine, say, "If you're in a whiny mood, that's OK, but I don't want to hear it. Why don't you go to your room? You can whine there until you are ready to stop."

Of course, the "go to your room" approach will not help you in stores and other public places, where a lot of whining happens. It helps to say, before you enter the store or mall: "We're going to buy laundry detergent today and nothing else." Another day, you can say, "We're going to the mall and you can pick out a book or toy today."

Pay attention to the triggers

If children have become regular whiners, try to figure out what sets them off. Does it only happen with you, or with others as well? Is there something particular your child whines about?

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Whining children may merely need a hug or a comforting word. If a child whines because you said *no*, you should try to respond. You don't have to change your *no* to a *yes*, but you can acknowledge the child's feelings of sadness, anger or disappointment.

You might say, for example: "I know how much you would like to stay up later, but your bedtime is 8 o'clock." Or "sometimes it's so hard to wait, isn't it?"

While it's only natural to get annoyed, sometimes the best way to respond to whining is with love and understanding. ♦

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