

Helping a child learn to cope with not getting what she or he wants

“But I did a good job asking so why can’t I have it?”

Kids often want something from their parents, such as a cookie, a later bedtime, help with shoelaces, etc. When a parent can say *yes*, these are great opportunities for some quick in-the-moment-teaching to help a child get better at communicating a want or need. Communicating wants and needs is a life skill that's important for independence and coping.

However, parents often have to say *no* to what a child wants -- *no* to that second cookie, or *no* to a later bedtime -- even if the child did a good job communicating. While it's way less fun for everyone when a parent says *no*, these are equally important in-the-moment teaching opportunities. This is because learning to manage the disappointment of not getting what one wants is also a critical life skill.

Discuss the suggestions that follow with your child’s team because it takes a true school-home (and maybe even outside professional) approach to help a child build communication *and* coping capabilities. Some children will need intensive, structured intervention, especially if their behaviors are extreme or unsafe.

A mental health challenge such as depression or anxiety can affect a child's ability to cope. We strongly recommend you discuss concerning behaviors with a pediatrician or mental health professional.

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- **Reinforce all instances, big and small, of positive coping behavior to encourage future coping behaviors.** Be on the lookout for when your child does accept *no* for an answer, is a good sport, agrees to compromise, etc. In those instances, praise or in some other way reinforce the positive behavior. Describe positive behavior and also label it using words like **patient**, **cope/coping**, and **flexible** (we want kids to learn coping vocabulary).

Mom buckles up Logan, then gets into her side of the car. Her cell phone rings and Mom has to take a very quick call about work. Logan waits quietly. When done, Mom says, *“Logan, you waited so quietly when I was on my phone! Thanks for being patient! High 5!”*

“Sadie, I think you would have liked to have stayed longer at the pet store. Thanks for being such a good sport about going home now. You are doing such a good job coping!” Dad then swings Sadie around.

Do not underestimate the value of this type of in-the-moment teaching, even when the interaction is brief. Additionally, a very important bonus is that often these interactions are enjoyable for both parent and child!

Tip: Not possible to reinforce in real-time your child's positive behavior? Later, take a few minutes to review and celebrate what your child did that was positive. Check out our *Tips, After-the-Moment Teaching*.

- Collaborate with your child's team on a token (incentive/reward) system. In contrast to the preceding suggestion -- where a parent spontaneously reinforces a child in real-time for positive behavior -- this is a carefully planned system where a child knows in advance what the expectations and rewards are.

Dad, Mom, the school team, and even Mika (Mika gives input on the reward, type of token) work together on a token system for Mika. The basic plan is that each time Mika stays positive when she is told *no*, she earns a star sticker which she places on a chart. Once she fills in the entire chart, she will get to go to the big playground that is 30 minutes away.

Tip: Make sure your child fully understands how the token system will work including what exactly she/he needs to say and do to earn tokens. In the above example, the adults would need to define “stay positive” as this term is vague.

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- Ask your child's team to collaborate with you on creating a social story™ (we are huge fans of Carol Gray's social story™ model). Even better: have them teach you how to do it! (There are helpful online resources.) A social story is a great tool for clear, visual teaching. They can be hand-written with hand-drawn pictures or they can use real photos (there are social story programs and apps). Ideally, a child should be involved in the process of creating it. You can then refer to the story as needed.

Elijah screams angrily whenever he's told it's time to stop playing his favorite video game. Using photos of Elijah, the school Occupational Therapist works with Elijah to create a social story that includes ideas like: *I love to play my video game; Sometimes Mom or Dad says I need to take a break from the game; Sometimes I get really mad when I'm told it's time to take a break or be done for the day; I know I can't play the game all the time because I have other things to do like eat and do homework; When Mom or Dad says time for a break from the video game, I can do this....; etc.*

Tip: Use thinking bubbles in the social story to show the thoughts and feelings of not only your child, but also of the others in the story, such as parents or siblings. For kids who have a hard time understanding their thoughts and feelings and those of others, social stories and other visuals are a great opportunity for exploring the point of view of other people.

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- Make sure your child understands **First-Then** and **Now-Later**. We cannot emphasize enough the importance and value of these concepts. Talk with your child's team about how they can help your child learn these concepts.

Joe says, "Daddy, I want horsey back ride," but Dad is in the middle of paying bills. Dad responds, "Joe wants a horsey back ride! Thanks for saying to Daddy what you want! High 5! I can't right now, but I can later." Dad grabs a scrap of paper and writes: **First: Daddy pays bills ---Then: Daddy gives Joe horsey back ride.** He then says, "See this? It says, 'First: Daddy pays bills ---Then: Daddy gives Joe horsey back ride.' So, when I am all done paying bills, I will give you a horsey back ride."

→ Note that if Joe waits patiently, Dad would reinforce that positive behavior.

Tip: Using a visual as you explain a **first-then** sequence of events can really help a child understand and accept a plan or having to wait. Dry erase, magnetic, or Velcro® boards are great for this purpose, however, scrap paper will do in a pinch. Also, there are first-then/visual schedule apps available for cell phones.

Generally speaking, visual schedules are an amazing tool. They lessen angst and disappointment for many kids with autism. They can be fairly short (like First-Then) or they can cover a longer period of time. A visual schedule can be used in advance to prepare a child for what's going to happen (this morning, today, tomorrow, next week, etc.). Also it can be used in-the-moment as a reminder. Ask your child's team about a visual schedule system for home.

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- Try this two step approach when a child does a good job communicating a want/need, but you have to say *no*: 1. reinforce the communication itself; then 2. try to redirect your child with some kind of distraction or an alternative. Many parents are good at distraction and redirection! But be sure first to reinforce the communication.

“Wow, Noah, you did such a great job asking for a puppy!” Mom gives Noah a big hug. Mom then says, “Sorry, we can’t get a puppy. How about right now we blow some bubbles?”

Remember, communication of wants and needs is a very important life skill, including for coping. Even when you have to say *no*, it's so important you reinforce your child's communication.

- Use humor to lighten things up when a child is not getting what she/he wants. Not only can humor de-escalate a situation, we believe the use of humor in difficult situations can actually help some kids develop a sense of perspective that not all disappointment is the end of the world. (You know your child and if she/he does not like humor, skip it.)

Anna: “More cookies, please!” Mom responds, “I like your ‘please’! You are being so green!” Mom then says in a dramatic, joking tone of voice, “But more cookies? More cookies? Yikes! You are going to turn into the Cookie Monster! No way, two cookies is all you get!” Then Mom pretends to be the Cookie Monster and tickles Anna.

→ When Mom tells Anna she is “being so green,” she is making a reference to a **MooBoo Color Rule** about how to **be green** when saying or asking for what one wants (i.e., how to be polite). This is from *Talking about Thinking*.

We all know that distraction, redirection, and humor work only some of the time. The suggestions that follow are for the times when they don't.

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- Use **mantras**. These are statements you calmly repeat to help your child calm down and to develop coping skills. Repeating a mantra is often more useful than trying to reason with an upset child. Also, mantras give *you* something to say when you are unable to take a break or walk away, such as when you are driving and your child is screaming in the backseat.

Mom and Keily are driving home from school. Keily always wants Mom to drive the same route home, but Mom wants Keily to learn to be more flexible. So when Keily asks Mom to turn right at the stop sign, Mom responds, *“Thank you so much for asking nicely. But today I am going straight at the stop sign.”* Keily begins to scream. Mom knows reasoning with Keily will not help. For the rest of the car ride Mom calmly repeats the following mantra, *“I understand this is hard for you, but sometimes I have to say ‘No.’”*

→ Helping a child like Keily build flexibility capabilities is challenging and will take more than repeating a mantra. We will expand on this in a separate *Tips & Topics*. Note that having a mantra to say in challenging situations can really help a parent stay calm, especially when a child doesn't!

“Sometimes people get what they want and sometimes they don't.” (repeat)

The idea of repeating a mantra might seem silly, but we have found them to be a very helpful tool for parents. Also, kids can be encouraged to find *I* mantras that help them self-calm. An example is *“I will be okay.”* (Some might refer to this as positive self-talk.)

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- For the times you say yes to reinforce a child's communication, use a mantra about how sometimes you'll say yes, but sometimes you'll say *no*. The next time, when you say *no*, you repeat the “sometimes” mantra with a reminder of when you said yes.

At bedtime, Liam asks Mom to read one more book.

Mom responds, “*Good job asking for one more book!*” Mom gives Liam a high 5. She then says, “*Tonight I say ‘yes’ because you did a good job asking and I have the time. Sometimes I will say ‘yes,’ and sometimes I will say ‘no.’ Tomorrow I will probably say ‘no’ even if you do a good job asking.*”

The following night, again Liam asks for one more book. Mom responds, “*Wow! You have gotten so good at asking nicely! Last night I said ‘yes’ to one more book, but tonight I am saying ‘no.’ Sometimes I will say ‘yes,’ and sometimes I will say ‘no.’*” Liam says (a little grumpily), “*Okay.*” Mom immediately responds, “*Thanks for saying ‘okay,’ about no more books! I know you feel disappointed that I said no. I am so proud of you for coping!*” Mom then tickles Liam.

→ There is a lot of in-the-moment teaching packed into this interaction! Mom reinforces Liam's asking nicely for one more book (even though she says *no*); she works in a mantra; she reinforces Liam for coping with *no*; she describes and validates his feelings (this is important); and she uses the word “coping” which helps Liam learn what this word means.

- If your child asks for something from another child, and that child says *no*, see if you can facilitate a compromise. If the other child won't budge, reinforce your child's behavior as best you can. If your child's positive behavior was a big deal (e.g., normally he grabs something he wants), you might also reward her/him with the promise of a small, special treat later. Just make sure you follow through on that promise.

“*Michael, I'm so proud of you for asking for a turn with the shovel. I'm sorry the boy said ‘no.’ Sometimes people say ‘no,’ even when we ask nicely. Because you did such a good job asking for a turn, tonight you can have an extra 10 minutes on YouTube!*”

→ See how Dad worked in a *Sometimes* mantra? We really do think this kind of mantra can help a child learn to accept and cope with the reality that she/he will not always get what she/he wants.

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- When a child really melts down, try "after-the-moment teaching." This is a non-judgmental, but honest short discussion of what happened that takes place later after the child has calmed down and feels better. The point is to help a child process and learn from the experience. It's also a way to help a child think about how others reacted to her/his behavior.

You do not have to draw or use any kind of graphic organizer to do after-the-moment teaching, instead you can have a brief conversation. For some kids, great interactions can happen as you are driving your child somewhere. We do like comic-style graphic organizers because many kids are engaged by them and respond well to visual teaching. They also are an opportunity for back-and-forth conversation and to reinforce positive behaviors like sitting still and paying attention. For some examples see our *Tips & Topics, After-the-Moment Teaching*.

Carter throws himself onto the floor and screams at McDonald's when Mom says *no* to a strawberry shake instead of milk. In-the-moment, Mom repeats a mantra as she hustles him out to the car. Later, when Carter has calmed down, they work together on a cartoon of what happened. The visual includes what Carter, Mom, Carter's sister, and the other patrons, with thinking bubbles to show thoughts and feelings. They discuss and draw a "next time" plan for when Carter is told he can't have something to eat that he wants.

After-the-moment teaching is neutral because we do not want to send a message to a kid that she/he is "bad." Also, it's usually not helpful to tell a child to not think or feel a certain way, or to minimize their thoughts and feelings (e.g., A parent says, "Oh, it's silly of you to think that!"). Instead acknowledge a child's thoughts and feelings. Seek advice from your child's professionals on what to say and do to help your child learn to cope, but do not shy away from after-the-moment teaching as it can be very helpful.

Suggestions for helping a child learn to cope with *no*.

- Think **baby steps**: reinforce behavior even if it's only a minor improvement. Slow progress, with a lot of ups and downs, is still progress! If you expect too much at once from your child, you'll set both of you up for a lot of frustration.

Mia asks for more time on her iPad and Dad replies, “No, not tonight. Sometimes I say ‘yes,’ and sometimes I say ‘no.’” Mia begins to argue in a loud, angry voice about how unfair Dad is. Dad then prompts Mia by crossing his arms and giving her a “look.” Dad’s prompt reminds Mia she is expected to use an *inside voice* and not argue when told *no* for more iPad time. Mia grudgingly says in a quieter voice, “Okay.” Dad immediately reinforces by saying, “Hey, good job coping with your disappointment. I know it's really hard for you when we say no to more iPad time. I'm proud of you.” He then tickles her (she likes that).

→ Did Mia perfectly handle her disappointment? Nope! However, Dad reinforces Mia's grudging “Okay” because it's an improvement for her. Dad recognizes he needs be patient and to reinforce the minor successes.

It really can take years for a child to get better at coping with life's disappointments and other challenges. Maturity can help but often it takes a lot of hard work by the child and caring adults, including school and maybe outside professionals and parents. If you find this discouraging, hang in there! Even though it might take a long time, significant improvement *can* happen!

For children who are mostly non-communicative: Consider saying yes when a child's communication is a really big deal, even it's a hassle for you.

Some kids tend to communicate only in response to a question, direction, or prompt. When a child who is mostly non-communicative initiates a communication for something, consider bending the rules and saying yes. Why? A child like this usually needs a lot of intervention and reinforcement to get better at initiating communication of a want or need. Your yes will hopefully reinforce the communication.

Note that *non-communicative* is not necessarily the same thing as nonverbal. There are many individuals who are nonverbal but do communicate in some other way, such as with a PECS book or an electronic communication device.

Amelia rarely initiates a communication of a want or need. She touches her dad's back and says, "I want go Home Depot, see ceiling fans." Even though Dad is busy with yard work, he wants to reinforce her having initiated on her own a communication of a want (that included touching Dad to get his attention). So he immediately responds, "Yes! I would love to take you to Home Depot to see the ceiling fans. Thank you so much for telling Dad that you want to go to Home Depot to see the ceiling fans. Let's go!" Dad then takes his child to Home Depot to look at the ceiling fans. (During this outing, Dad continues to do in-the-moment teaching!)

Parents cannot always drop what they are doing or follow through in another way on a child's request for something. Nor should they always give a child what she/he wants. However, if you have a child who tends to be passive (does not initiate communication), when possible, reinforce a big-deal communication initiated by the child. Consider that the short-term inconvenience may be outweighed by the long-term benefit. Remember, communicating wants and needs is important for independence and coping.

Tip: Waiting (on giving a child something she/he wants) is an excellent in-the-moment teaching strategy to motivate a child to communicate. Check out our *Tips* on this and talk to your child's team about what you can try at home to help your child become more of an initiator when it comes to communicating.

Final thoughts on helping a child learn to cope with *no*, or not getting what she or he wants.

Of course there will be times when you take the path of least resistance, and you will say *yes* to a child. We get it, we've been there! However, think of in-the-moment teaching in the tough situations as a *pay now versus pay even more later*. The price of not doing in-the-moment teaching might be that unproductive, negative behaviors become more entrenched as kids get older. This hard work is worth it; your child is worth it!

The following is so important, we are repeating it:

A mental health challenge such as depression or anxiety can affect a child's ability to cope. We strongly recommend you discuss concerning behaviors with a pediatrician or mental health professional.

