

Helping a child learn to cope with *no*

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

Learning to cope with *no* can be really hard for autistic kids who are black-and-white thinkers and/or who have a challenge with flexibility or coping with disappointment.

Additionally, there are a significant number of autistic kids who struggle with functionally communicating wants and needs. Even when emerging communicators do “a good job” communicating what they want, the parent cannot always say yes.

What to do?

What follows are tips for parents on how to help your child learn to cope with *no*. While these interactions might not be super fun, they are very important in-the-moment teaching opportunities. *Learning to handle the disappointment of not getting what they want is a critical life skill for your child.*

Discuss the suggestions that follow with your child’s team because often it takes a true school-home (and maybe even outside professional) approach to help a child build coping skills.

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

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

Spontaneously 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. Be sure to describe the coping behavior and 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, often these interactions are enjoyable for both parent and child, a very important bonus!

Not sure what reinforcement is or how to do this? Talk to your child's team. For basics on reinforcement with examples of parents reinforcing their child's positive behavior, check out *Tips & Topics, Spotlight: Reinforcement*.

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 & Topics, After-the-Moment Teaching*.

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

Collaborate with your child's team on an incentive/reward system that targets coping with *no*.

In contrast to the preceding suggestion where a parent spontaneously reinforces positive behavior in real-time -- this suggestion is about a carefully planned system where a child knows in advance what the expectations and rewards are. Often known as “token” systems, these can be a very effective because they tap into a child’s motivation.

The school team, Dad, Mom, and 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: Kick off your incentive system using a social story™ that clearly explains expected behavior (such as what “stay positive” means). See the next page for more on social stories!

While token systems can be highly effective, they need to be very well thought out, and the adults utilizing them must be 100 % consistent in following them.

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

Ask your child's team to collaborate with you on creating a social story™.

A social story is a great tool for kids who benefit from clear, direct, and visual teaching (i.e., most autistic kids). Social stories can be hand-written with hand-drawn cartoon characters or they can use real photos (there are social story programs and apps). We recommend you follow Carol Gray's process for creating a social story because this process includes the participation of the child. [<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>]

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 the 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 in-the-moment teaching on taking the point of view of other people.

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

Make sure your child understands these concepts: *First-Then* and *Now-Later*.

Often, a child will be told they have to wait to get what they want. Or, that they need to do one thing first before being able to do another thing. In other words, the child is not being told *no* outright, just that they need to wait to get what they want. But if a child does not understand *first-then* and *now-later*, all they hear is *no* when told something like, “*Not right now, but later we can do that.*” We cannot emphasize enough the importance of your child learning these concepts. Talk with your child’s team about how they can help your child learn them.

Owen says, “*Daddy, I want horsey back ride,*” but Dad is in the middle of paying bills. Dad responds, “*Owen wants a horsey back ride! 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.*” Owen replies, “*OK.*” Dad then praises Owen: “*Thanks for saying, ‘OK’! Because you are being such a good sport about having to wait, I’m going to give you an extra long horsey back ride later!*”

→ Note how Dad reinforced Joe’s coping behavior of agreeing to wait to get the horsey back ride. This is what you should do when your child copes.

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.

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.

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

Try this approach when a child does a good job communicating a want/need, but you have to say *no*:

- 1. First, reinforce the communication itself;**
- 2. Next, gently (but directly) say *no*;**
- 3. Then, quickly redirect your child with some kind of distraction or an alternative.**

Many autistic kids struggle with communicating in a functional way. Parents are in a great position to help their child practice and get better at this during the course of everyday life (we call this in-the-moment teaching). This is because they can tap into a child's motivation to teach and reinforce a child when the child wants something. In other words, if a child wants something and communicates for it, the parent can reinforce by giving the child the desired thing.

It gets trickier when the parent has to say *no* despite the child doing a good job requesting. In these situations, parents should still reinforce the communication, but then move on to a gentle *no* and a distraction to soften the blow.

Noah is learning how to request something in the form of a question (instead of grabbing or demanding, "I want that."). Seeing a neighbor's puppy, Noah asks his mom, "Can we get a puppy, please?" Mom responds, "*Wow, Noah, great job asking for a puppy! You used a question just like we practiced!*" Mom gives Noah a big hug. Mom then says, "*Sorry, we can't get a puppy, Daddy is allergic to dogs. Hey, how about you ask Mr. Curiel if you can pet the puppy?*"

→ We get it: we know that redirection or distraction often does not work, and that autistic kids can be very persistent (like a dog with a bone, pun intended!). But sometimes it does and is worth a try! And remember, if you are continually reinforcing the little instances of your child being flexible or accepting *no* for an answer, then you just might find they get better at coping with not getting what they want.

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.

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

Use humor to lighten things up when a child is not getting what they want.

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. That said, parents: you know your child and if they do 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 friendly, positive, and/or polite). This is from *Talking about Thinking*.

Many autistic kids enjoy humor, even if it is somehow quirky or off-beat. Humor is a wonderful way, not only to keep things enjoyable and playful, it can be a way for you to connect with your child.

If your child does not appreciate humor, consider whether there is a sensory issue at play; e.g., maybe your child finds your joking too loud or raucous, or maybe they dislike tickling! Perhaps your child would enjoy humor, but a very low key version. However, some kids truly do not respond to any kind of joking and that's okay! You can still use warmth and positivity as you interact with them, including when you are saying *no*.

Tips 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.)

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Sometimes, make an exception and say yes to reinforce a child’s communication. But then use a mantra about how sometimes you’ll say yes, but sometimes you’ll say no.

It’s okay to bend the rules to reinforce positive behavior. But be sure to use the *sometimes, yes-sometimes, no* mantra. This is a form of preparation: you are preparing your child for the reality that next time you will say no. Then 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.

Tip: If your child is a reader, create a visual with your go-to mantra; e.g., “Sometimes Dad says yes, sometimes Dad says *no*, and that’s OK.”

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If your child asks for something from another child, and that child says *no*, see if you can facilitate a compromise. If not, reinforce your child's positive behavior.

It can feel frustrating when your child does a good job with a social skill (e.g., asked in a friendly tone of voice) and the other kid says *no*. Sometimes, you'll be able to get that other child to agree to a compromise.

However, there are times when despite your best efforts, that other child will not budge. In such situations, reinforce your child's behavior as best you can.

If your child's positive behavior was an especially big deal (e.g., normally they grab what they want), you might also reward them 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 they will not always get what they wants.

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If your child got very upset over your *no*, later do after-the-moment teaching.

After-the-moment teaching is a non-judgmental, but honest review with your child of what happened. It 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 the child's behavior.

Cartoon-style graphic organizers are really helpful during after-the-moment teaching 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*. You do not have to use a graphic organizer to do after-the-moment teaching. A brief conversation can also be useful. For some kids, great interactions can happen as you are driving your child somewhere.

At the fast food restaurant, Carter throws himself onto the floor and screams 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. It includes Carter, Mom, Carter's sister, and the other patrons, with thinking bubbles to show everyone's 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.

You do not have to use a graphic organizer to do after-the-moment teaching. A brief conversation can also be useful. For some kids, great interactions can happen as you are driving your child somewhere.

After-the-moment teaching is neutral because we do not want to send a message a kid is "bad." Also, avoid telling a child to not think or feel a certain way, or to minimize these thoughts and feelings (e.g., A parent says, "Oh, it's silly you feel mad right now!"). 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.

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

Think baby steps: reinforce positive behavior even if it's only a minor improvement.

Slow progress, with a lot of ups and downs along the way, *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: even it's really inconvenient for you, say yes when a child's communication is a really big deal.

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 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, "Home Depot, ceiling fans." Even though Dad is busy with yard work, he wants to reinforce Amelia 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 parents always give a child what they want. 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 they want) 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 a initiator when it comes to communicating.

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.

