



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Negotiating with your young child

"Honey, you need to give your stuffed animal to the nice lady for just a moment," implored a young mom to her 1 and a half-year-old child as they were going through the security zone at an airport. The child grabbed on to her stuffed puppy even tighter.

"Let's negotiate this out," begged the mom. The mother then took her daughter off to the side, where she tried to explain why it was necessary for the child to part with her little puppy. The child's screaming escalated as the mom continued her "negotiation." After 10 minutes, a frustrated mom and crying child passed through security, after the mom had firmly taken away the stuffed animal and put it on the conveyer belt.

Here's how you negotiate with such a young child. You don't!

Instead of talking incessantly, the mom should have simply informed her daughter that the stuffed animal needed to be put down for a few minutes. The youngster's protests should have been ignored, or perhaps distracted with something else. In a few moments, she would have been reunited with her puppy and mom and daughter would have been fine.

Why is it that parents seem to think that everything with their kids needs to be negotiated, discussed, explained, and processed? So many parents seem uneasy, and even scared of doing the wrong thing. They are fearful that a bad experience at an airport may resonate throughout a child's lifetime. Concerned parents want their kids to feel good about everything, and think that understanding promotes acceptance.

Life is complicated for young children. There are so many rules to learn. It's reasonable for parents to try to help their children understand not only the expectation but the rationale behind the rule. The problem is that talking excessively is more likely to result in confusion rather than understanding. With young children, it's better to state the rule in ten words or less and then enforce the expectation. You don't negotiate with a child less than 2 years of age.

When your child is between 2 to 4 years of age, you can begin to give choices and simple explanations. However, well-meaning parents inadvertently communicate little because they talk too much. Use simple words and phrases, and let your children's reactions be your guide as to when you are over-talking.

There are times when it's fine to negotiate with your toddler, but remember the three "never rules" of any negotiation.

1. **Never negotiate in response to bad behavior.** If your youngster screams or yells about some rule she feels is inappropriate, your offer to negotiate will only encourage such behavior in the future. Teach your children at an early age that your willingness to listen and understand depends upon their expressing disagreements in a reasonable manner.
2. **Never pretend to negotiate something you can't.** The child's stuffed animal had to go through the security screen. There was nothing to negotiate. Make sure your children understand that some rules are not open for discussion, particularly anything having to do with safety or moral standards.
Parents need to be particularly careful about this with their older kids. Have a clear idea as to exactly how much you are willing to compromise. If you get into a situation where you are not sure about something they are proposing, ask for some time to consider their viewpoint.
3. **Never negotiate under duress, or when you are physically or emotionally exhausted.** This is a tough "never rule" to follow. One of the many challenges of being a parent is that you are always on, and there is rarely a good time for a relaxed, pressure-free discussion with your child. Be mindful of making big decisions when you are under pressure. If you find yourself in that situation, put the discussion on hold until you are better prepared for a thoughtful conversation.

Gregory Ramey, Ph.D., is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more of his columns, visit www.childrensdayton.org/ramey. Send comments to Dr. Ramey at rameyg@childrensdayton.org.