

Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages - Pick your Spot

It is important to know your limits and stick to them. Typically, your child will push those limits in predictable ways in routine situations. Ahead of time - before you get into one of those situations - know what your limit is going to be.

The first step is to identify what is important to you – what are your values? Is it more important to you that your child has lots of after school activities, or is it more important that homework is done? Should homework be done as soon as school is over, or is time outside with friends more important? Is it more important to you that your house be clean or that you have more family time? Is it more important that your child plays sports or that you have a home cooked meal every night? Once you have thought about what is more important to you in a particular situation, you'll be clear on what your next steps are.

Then, ask yourself what are your boundaries or limits? What behavior matters most to you and what expectations are age appropriate.

We're not thinking about situations where you will establish consequences for your child misbehaving. Here we are focusing on you, as a parent, remaining firm and consistent in maintaining an established limit. If you are going to set a limit for the amount of screen time your child can have after school, you need to be ready to consistently enforce that limit. For your child to learn that there are limits, you, your partner, spouse (or other caregiver) all have to deliver the same message.

For example, if you're going to the grocery store with your child, you want to avoid putting yourself in a position where you give in to their whining because you are too tired or can't think of a response in the moment. Is your child going to whine for some wildly unhealthy cereal? If they are, you need to know ahead of time what you are going to say. You could even lay the ground rules on the way to the store. You could say "You can pick out any cereal you want, as long as it has less than 10grams of sugar per serving because too much sugar is bad for you." You are allowing your child to make a choice and giving a reason for your position. You will have to be consistent and if they choose a cereal that you don't generally buy, you need to honor your commitment. Once you have established your response to their pleas, you can use the same technique with other requests. **Know what you are going to say. If you are going to say yes, say "yes" the first time they ask. If you're going to say no, say no and stick to it. Don't let them learn that you can be worn down into permitting a forbidden behavior.**

It would not be hard to spend all of your time and energy battling with your children, but it would not be advisable or effective. Pick your battles. With children in elementary school you should explain why you have set a particular limit. Be consistent in what you say and in the rules you set. The battles you pick should matter to you, reflecting your values. Maybe you really believe kids should be at school on time. This is your battle. They may have to go partially dressed, without their homework, but they will be on time. Once you set a limit, stick to it. And model: model appropriate behavior, model the behavior you want to see from your

child. If they have to be on time to school, you should be on time for your commitments as well. Show them the behavior that you expect to see from them whether that be words, actions or anything else you'd like to see them do.

Remember too that as children mature, you will have to give them more responsibility, negotiate some issues, and create safe opportunities for them to learn from their mistakes. When children move onto Middle School, navigating picking your spot becomes textured.

Pause here and start to think about what battles really matter to you. Your goal is not to resolve with absolute certainty what those battles are. Go back later after you've made a preliminary list and talk about the list with your spouse or partner. Try to get on the same page so that your responses are consistent. Don't start off too ambitiously; better to pick just something relatively easy to be consistent about to build your muscle for holding firm.

SDJ 8/13/18