

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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Focus on "Do" Instead of "Don't"

Children want and need to know their limits. When you give children clear limits, they quickly learn the "rules of the game." Clear limits tell children exactly what is expected of them. This helps them take responsibility for their own decisions and makes it less likely they will misbehave.

As a parent, it is important to clearly explain your expectations. A limit should tell your child *what* is expected, *when*, and *how well*. Decide exactly what you want your preschooler to do before giving directions. Tell your child in simple words what you want. Keep in mind that young children cannot remember a long list of directions.

If a mother tells her preschooler, "Every night, after we finish eating supper, you are to take your plate, glass, and flatware over to the sink," the child knows exactly what to do. In contrast, "Clean everything up after supper," is vague. The child doesn't really know what is expected.

Emphasize the Positive

Children tend to learn the limits better if parents emphasize the positive. A parent should tell a child what *to* do rather than only what *not* to do. A child who hears her parent say, "Kelly, play in the yard, not in the street!" has an understanding of her limits and opportunities. If the parent says only, "Don't go into the street!" the child does not have as clear an idea of what to do. Or a parent might say, "There are many breakable things in this store so please walk carefully and keep your hands to yourself." This is more pleasant and more helpful than, "Don't break anything."

Avoid the Negative

If our speech is loaded with negative words (no, don't, stop it, quit that, cut it out, shut up), our children may decide we are not much fun to listen to and just tune us out.

When children hear many negative words, the meaning of those words is weakened. For example, suppose a preschooler hears: "Don't touch the cup. Don't touch the coffee table. Don't fool with the radio. Don't go near the stove." The child might decide that it is dangerous to touch anything and become passive and uninterested in exploring and learning. Or the child may decide that adults just say "no" and that the way to deal with them is to touch as many things as possible before they get really mad. The child may not know that the "don't" about the cup of steaming coffee is more important than the "don't" about touching the coffee table. If you restrict your use of strong negative words to situations of great importance, your preschooler is more likely to hear and obey them.

Dealing with Emotions

Setting positive limits is especially important for helping children deal with their emotions. When children become angry and act destructively, parents are likely to think first of negative limits: "Don't hit your brother!" "Don't talk to me like that!" "Don't throw things." Instead, tell your child what you expect her to *do* and how to deal with anger? Instead of "Don'ts", a parent might say, "When you get angry, use your words to tell me how you feel--say you are angry!" This limit clearly provides the child with one way to deal with anger.

Use More Do's than Don'ts

Tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Using "Do's" rather than "Don'ts" may be difficult if you are in the don't habit. It requires thought and practice. However, the improvement in your relationship with your child will make it worth the effort.

Treat your child with the same consideration as you do when you talk to your friends. Positive communications lead the way to excellent relationships.

The word "Don't" forbids a behavior, but it doesn't *teach* a child the right way to do things. Worse, it can lead to a negative relationship between parent and child, a relationship that seems always focused on what the child is doing wrong. Saying "Do" rather than "Don't" can be the antidote.

There are two different types of "Do's"--the **teaching do** and the **redirecting do**.

The **teaching do** gives instruction to your child. Use this "Do" message to teach your child what to do.

The **redirecting do** can be used to distract your child. Rather than saying "Don't" to the current activity, present your child with another activity that you find acceptable.

Use "Do" statements to make your messages to your preschooler clear and positive. Examine your limits. Are they clear? Will your child understand what is expected? Are they positive? Will your child know what to do as well as what not to do?

Sources:

Love and Limits: Parenting With Good Sense. University of Minnesota Extension Services. 1993.

Dave Riley, UW-Madison/Extension Child Development Specialist. Presentation at Parent Support Group Leader Training. 1994.

Teaching Examples

Don't

Don't drag your coat.
Don't slam the door.

Do

Hold your coat off the ground like this.
Close the door softly, please.

Redirecting Examples

Don't

Don't touch the lamp.
Don't color on my magazine.

Do

Here, play with this.
Color on this paper, instead.

Practice Examples

Change each "Don't" statement into a "Do" statement.

Change this....

Don't throw sand on the lawn.
Don't spill your juice.
Don't park your bike there.
Don't squeeze the kitty.
Don't run in the store.
Don't talk with your mouth full.

....to this

Keep sand in the sandbox.
