

## Engaging Children's Cooperation

Here are some simple guidelines for helping children shift into a cooperative mode. Try them the next time you are experiencing oppositional behavior from your child. It's important to be very aware that there is a direct connection between children's feelings and children's behavior. When we can tune in to how children feel, especially when they are experiencing anger, hurt, or frustration, we can use that knowledge to teach them to deal with those emotions in a positive way.

### To help with feelings:

- ▶ Listen with full attention. Stop what you are doing and really listen. Read between the lines. What is the child really telling you?
- ▶ Acknowledge their feelings with a word. Let them know you are paying attention with the occasional "uhmmm" or "I see..." but don't interrupt. Let them talk until they have said everything on their minds.
- ▶ Give their feelings a name. A simple statement from you lets them know that you really heard them, and that you understand. "Boy, I'll bet you were really mad!" "Oh no! That must have been embarrassing!", or "How frustrating!" They may not need you to solve the problem. Often it's enough for you to simply validate their feelings.
- ▶ Give them their wishes in fantasy. It may sound silly, but when we grant a wish in fantasy, it lets the child know that you empathize with what they are feeling.

Remember that children have a right to their feelings. All feelings can be accepted; it is actions that must be limited. "I can see that you are really angry with your brother. Tell him how you feel with your words, not your fists."

There are many tools that we can use to encourage cooperation, and not every tool will work in every situation. Here are a few you can try:

### Engaging Cooperation

- ▶ *Describe the problem.*  
By describing the problem and stopping there, you allow the child to come up with the appropriate solution.  
  
INSTEAD OF: "How many times have I told you not to leave the TV on?"  
DESCRIBE: "The TV is on and there's no one watching it."  
INSTEAD OF: "I'm sick and tired of stepping on Legos!"  
DESCRIBE: "There are Legos on the living room floor."

▶ ***Give information.***

In this case one hopes that with a better understanding of the problem, the child will realize how to resolve it and act accordingly.

INSTEAD OF: “Why is the front door wide open again?”

GIVE INFORMATION: “When the door is open, the air conditioner can’t cool the house properly. It lets all cool air out.”

INSTEAD OF: “If you draw on the walls again, you’re in big trouble!”

GIVE INFORMATION: “Walls are not for drawing on; paper is for drawing on.”

▶ ***Say it with a word.***

When we go into “lecture mode,” kids tune us out. Keep it short and sweet.

INSTEAD OF: “I’ve told you half a dozen times to put on your shoes. Why do I have to tell you and over again?”

SAY IT WITH A WORD: “Shoes!”

INSTEAD OF: “How many times do I have to ask you to play quietly while your sister is napping? You know better than to shout!”

SAY IT WITH A WORD: “Quietly.”

▶ ***Talk about your feelings.***

You’ve listened to their feelings. Now let them know that you have feelings too. For example, “I feel so frustrated when you interrupt me when I’m on the phone.” or “I don’t like it when you pull on my shirt.”

▶ ***Write a note.***

Obviously, this only works with children who are old enough to read, but it can be very effective, especially when handled with a sense of humor. A few samples:

“Hey James, don’t be mean! Your bunnies like a cage that’s clean! Love, Shadow & Pepper”  
How about a note taped to the TV, “Before you turn me on, the homework must be done!”

You can even use notes for pre-readers if you’re ingenious about it. A magazine picture of a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a picture of a smiling child taped to the bathroom door could be a daily reminder to brush teeth. A photo of toys neatly lined up on shelves or in a toy basket could be used as a non-verbal cue to put away playthings, especially if you tape it to a paper airplane and fly it into the messy play area!