

## **Stop the Whining**

*Sick of all the griping in your house? These two simple solutions can end it for good.*

By Joanne Miller

*"But Mo-o-o-o-m!"*

We've all heard it: that high-pitched whine that ranks close to fingernails on the blackboard on the irritation scale. Most parents have figured out ways to get kids to do their chores, share their toys, and get ready for school. But very few of us can get our kids to do those tasks without complaint.

Kids whine for a lot of reasons. They want something they don't have. They don't like what they're being asked to do. They're unhappy with the present situation. But kids also whine because, frankly, it works.

My kids are really good at whining. When they come to me begging me to change something—begging being defined as complaining, pouting, and general discontent—I typically solve the problem. If my son whines about his uncomfortable socks, I get him a different pair. Even if I tell him firmly, "All right, I'll find you some other socks, but next time try to find a comfortable pair to start with," I've just taught him that whining gets results.

Most parents unintentionally fall into this same trap. Whining can become so pervasive that we often don't even notice it. We come to expect that this is the tactic our children will use to demand change, no matter how much it grates on us. But whining doesn't have to be the norm. In fact, we owe it to our children to teach them a more effective way of expressing their needs, dealing with problems, and responding to disappointment. After all, no one ever got a raise by saying, "But bo-o-o-o-ss!"

Because this is such a universal problem, Dr. Scott Turansky and I developed two techniques that parents can use to put an end to whining. We have taught these techniques to hundreds of parents through our Effective Parenting seminars. Both can be used with children of all ages and both teach children valuable life skills such as negotiation, self-expression, and respect.

### **1. Obey First, Discuss Later**

I have a common predicament. I want my children to learn how to make their own decisions. I want to show them I value their ideas and wishes. But I also know it's important for my children to give up their agenda sometimes and follow instructions—even when they don't want to. The desire to make our children feel "heard" often leads parents to justify every instruction we give to our kids. While none of us wants our children to blindly follow a leader's instructions, we need to understand that evaluating a command is an advanced skill, one most kids won't master until

high school. This skill goes hand in hand with putting our values into practice and making decisions about morality. These concepts are simply too complex for young children.

Many parents have reacted against their own parents' authoritarian style and have ended up with children who cannot follow instructions without arguing. These children make poor employees, develop selfish attitudes about following someone else's leadership, and have a difficult time in relationships—all because they haven't learned how to sacrifice their own needs for others.

Discussing an instruction first can also give our children the wrong impression about obedience—that if they don't like the request, they don't have to do it. The fact is, many times we, as adults, have to obey even when it's not convenient. Children need to learn how to follow directions, not because they want to, but because obedience is the right thing to do.

The principle "Obey first and then we'll talk about it" strikes a good balance. It teaches children to do what their parent is asking, but it also gives them the chance to talk about their needs and feelings.

This technique is different from "Because I'm your mother and I said so!" Kids aren't asked to follow directions without having an opportunity for comment. That opportunity simply comes after compliance, not before.

This approach also breaks the pattern of having to explain every request we make of our kids. I will gladly talk to my children about my request, but first I expect their cooperation. I may not use this technique forever. But for now, it's helping us address the problem of our kids questioning every instruction they receive.

**How It Works.** This method is about as easy as it gets. You can start using it today. If little Brian has pulled a chair over to the counter and is climbing onto it, you may say, "Brian, we don't climb on chairs."

"But I was just..."

"No, you need to get down. Obey first and then we'll talk about it." Once he gets down, explain why climbing on chairs is dangerous. Together, think of a better way for him to get what he wants from the countertop.

Or consider this dialogue: "Karen, go get your pajamas on."

"But I don't want to go to bed."

"Put your pajamas on, and then we'll talk about it." After Karen gets her pajamas on, ask her why she's reluctant to go to bed, then come up with a solution together.

The idea of asking for compliance first mirrors God's parenting style. God often asks me to obey even when I don't understand why. In Genesis 22, Abraham was told to sacrifice his son Isaac without understanding why God would make such a request. Abraham's obedience was an act of faith, and God rewarded him. In Acts 8, Philip was told to leave Samaria, where a revival was taking place, and go to the desert. When he was there, he discovered the Ethiopian eunuch who was ready to trust Christ. In Acts 10, Peter went to Cornelius's house without knowing why. He later learned that God wanted to bring salvation to the Gentiles. Obedience doesn't have to hinge on understanding why.

Once children learn basic obedience, we can start to teach them another technique that develops their ability to express their needs in a respectful way.

## **2. The Wise Appeal**

Cal comes home from school at 3:00 p.m. He plops his books down and says to himself, "Whew! I'm tired. I just want to listen to my CDs and rest."

Just then his mom, Janet, comes in to greet him. "Cal, I'm glad you're home from school. I'd like you to go out and mow the lawn."

A number of scenarios could happen at this point. Cal might look up at his mother with irritation and say, "No way."

This leads to Janet getting more intense, willing to take on the challenge. "Listen," she says, "I don't want to hear any argument. I don't make you do many things around this house. You need to go out and mow the lawn now!"

What started as a request has now become a demand. Even if Cal does go mow the lawn, both he and his mother will have a bad feeling about the way this situation was played out.

But if Janet teaches Cal a technique called the wise appeal, he'll have a respectful way of responding to her request.

Here's how the scene could play out: "Cal, I'm glad you're home from school. I'd like you to go out and mow the lawn."

Cal is silent for a moment, trying to deal with his own emotions. "Mom, I understand you want me to mow the grass because it's getting high. I have a problem with that because I'm tired. I didn't get much sleep last night, and I had a tough day at school today. I was counting on resting and listening to my music for awhile. Could I please mow the lawn in two hours?"

Janet thinks for a moment and then replies, "That sounds fine. I'd just like to have it done before dinner."

Now, maybe you're thinking, My kids won't do that. It sounds like a cross between "The Brady Bunch" and "Leave It to Beaver." It's true, this sounds rather formal, but I've found this kind of appeal to work well with my kids. When they don't like my instructions or my response to their request, they have a plan for responding to me. I've even given them the exact words to use. They just have to fill in the blanks.

How It Works. The wise appeal is based on these three phrases:

I understand that you want me to...because...

I have a problem with that because...

Could I please...?

Unlike the first technique, the wise appeal is something you will have to teach your children to use. But even preschoolers can learn it. When my son Tim was only 3 years old, he heard his older brother use the wise appeal and wanted to try it out. One day when I called him in from playing outside, he replied, "I know you want me to come in, but I really want to stay outside." This wasn't exactly the wise appeal, but Tim was trying.

The wise appeal works because both parent and child get what they want. The first phrase, I understand you want me to...because..., shows that your child understands what you want. When we know our kids have heard us, we're more likely to negotiate, compromise, or listen to alternatives.

The second phrase, I have a problem with that because..., helps you understand your child. It also gives him a respectful way to tell you what he needs. After all, parents don't always have all the facts. Let's say you tell your daughter it's time to get in the car, but she has to go to the bathroom. If you tell her to "obey first

and then we'll talk about it," you'll be driving down the road looking for a public restroom. It's important to give children an honoring way to communicate their needs.

The third part of the wise appeal, *Could I please...*, gives a creative alternative. Your child focuses on a solution, not just the problem; you hear a suggestion, not just a complaint. Now your child is working with you toward a common goal. When your child appeals to you in this honoring way, you might find that he has a solution that works for both of you.

After my son David had learned the wise appeal, I said to him, "It's time to clean up the playroom. We have to go run errands." I didn't know he had just set up his train track. He said, "I understand you want me to clean up the toys because we have to go out. I have a problem with that because I just set up my train track. Could I please leave my train out until we get home?" That sounded reasonable to me, so I agreed. He cleaned up the rest of his toys without complaint, and we were soon out the door.

Of course, a child in this situation needs to be able to accept no as an answer, too. A child who can't accept no must go back to "obey first and then we'll talk about it." When your child learns how to obey with a good attitude, then she can use the wise appeal. If your child continues to whine after you've said no, you might say, "I've already said no. If you'd like to appeal I'll listen, but if you continue to whine, you'll have to go sit on your bed."

The same holds true for a child who doesn't follow through on his promise. Remember Cal, who promised his mother he'd mow the lawn? If dinnertime comes and Cal has still not mowed the lawn, it's time for a consequence, such as a lost privilege.

The wise appeal really can change the way your children approach you with problems. One mom told me, "I didn't think the wise appeal would work with my 9-year-old daughter. But a couple of weeks ago, I was frustrated with her whining and I decided to try it. I taught it to her and have encouraged her to use it when she's tempted to whine and complain. She likes it. I like it, too. It's made our dialogue more pleasant."

Not only will the wise appeal help reduce whining in your house now, it will teach your children a skill they'll use again and again as they move into adulthood. Children who know how to use the wise appeal learn that they can get their needs met by clearly expressing those needs. They learn that negotiation and compromise can go a long way toward reducing conflict in their lives. They learn to become part of the solution, not just to complain about the problem.

The wise appeal is illustrated in Scripture in the stories of Daniel, Nehemiah, and Esther. Each had a problem and had to approach authority figures in a wise way. They received positive answers to their requests, in part because of the honoring way in which their requests were made.

Both of these techniques are effective, but you'll need to decide which one is most effective with your children at any given time. If you have a child who continually argues before obeying, you might need to focus on "obey first and then we'll talk about it." If your family tends to emphasize strict obedience, you might want to allow for a wise appeal, teaching your children an honoring way to present their case.

Whichever technique you use, you'll find that putting an end to whining can change the whole atmosphere of your family life. When problems are solved with calm obedience and respectful negotiation, everyone benefits.

Joanne Miller, RN, BSN, is the co-author (with Dr. Scott Turansky) of *Say Goodbye to Whining, Complaining, and Bad Attitudes*, in *You and Your Kids* (WaterBrook). Learn more at <http://www.effectiveparenting.org>.

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