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Dear Parents of Young Children – Questions Which Parents Ask
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of young children

Questions Which Parents Ask

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

RECENTLY I WATCHED the mother of twin boys close the bedroom door with a sigh of relief after she had tucked them in for the night. These 2-year-olds had had themselves quite a day. They had strayed away several times, spilled things, upset things and generally turned the household upside down. No wonder their mother was relieved to come to the end of the day.

It is easy to see how this mother viewed the events of the day. Not only was she exhausted but like most mothers, she wondered if, at the time, she had handled each situation in the best possible way.

Some of you have sent in questions about certain situations which you would like to have discussed.

Let's begin with one of these:

Safety

"How can I help 17-month-old Mary to understand that she isn't to wander off and to trust her to stay within bounds?"

Let us suppose that some fine morning you decide it is time for Mary to play outdoors. You say to her, "stay in your own yard."

What meaning does "your own yard" have for Mary? Certainly it does not mean the same thing to her that it does to you. She will not understand about boundary lines nor will she appreciate all of the reasons why you want her to stay there. You, of course, know the tragic consequences of a child rushing out into a busy street. But Mary does not understand this at all.

You may be able to think up some device to mark off her own yard so that she begins to understand, but what will happen if her eyes light on

a bright flower next door or a tiny kitten appears around the corner of the steps? Will she be able to resist such attractions and remember her boundary lines? Likely not, if she is 17 months old.

It is difficult to set an age when a child can be trusted to stay outside and not wander off. Some children at three can be trusted to cross a street alone, depending on the traffic. Other children at four or five may cause us many anxious moments at almost any crossing.

This does not mean that we sit idly by until a child "catches on" or "learns the hard way" by being frightened or hurt.

It does mean that until a child has learned to take responsibility for his own safety we must take this responsibility for him.

In the meantime we can begin gradually to teach safety rules knowing that this will take time and that skill comes with practice. We can begin to say to Mary, as we hold on to her hand, "wait a minute, we must look for cars, let's look this way and that way. Wait, one is coming, now we must wait, now we can go." The next step is to encourage her to tell you when it is safe to cross. "Is one coming? Then we must wait. Now, is the way clear? Then we can go." In this way you can see how well Mary is learning her safety lesson.

Reinforce Your Teaching

There are many ways in which you can reinforce your teaching. Most important, Mother and Dad must observe traffic rules if they expect their children to do so. There are also many verses and stories which are useful at this point to support your teaching.

If we reserve a special tone of voice when a child is in physical danger, he is more apt to respond. If we talk about it too much a child may become over-anxious or just get tired of listening.

When a child is 4 or 5 and has become more dependable we may have to remind and repeat our warnings, particularly if a ball rolls out into the street. We must impress a child of any age with the fact that no matter how valuable the toy, he must look both ways before rushing out into the street.

Teaching by Punishment

What about punishment to teach a child to stay out of the street? If you have taken a child step by step through the learning process, and if he continually forgets or pays no attention to your teaching, more drastic measures will be necessary. Some parents in this case have punished a child by restricting him to his own yard or otherwise limiting his freedom. Certainly in the matter of a child's safety we cannot afford to take a chance.

In some neighborhoods, Mothers take turns supervising the children. In this way each mother is relieved of continual supervision and is free to carry on certain work or activities that would otherwise be difficult.

Perhaps it is the long view that we need to take as parents. We continually ask little children to accept a lot of rules that have no meaning for them. "Stay away from the street," "wash your hands," "keep your clothes clean," are adult standards which we are trying to impose on children. We need to work toward an understanding

of such rules as children grow older. While they are little, children are helped to accept rules from a loving parent simply because you want them to.

Handling the "No's":

"How do you handle the 'no, no,' stage in a 2-year-old? Even though I know this is a stage that children go through, when Davy continually uses these words it irritates me."

Isn't this because, in spite of our knowing, we are too apt to take these words literally? There is something about the word "no," uttered by a small child that fairly drives us into action. Even after thinking about it we may feel that this is not the way for Davy to act. Does this mean that Davy is getting to be stubborn, mean or just plain uncooperative? Likely it doesn't mean any of these. To Davy it probably means that it is an easy word to say, the sound it makes may even be fascinating to him so he uses it over and over. Or he may just be trying it out to see what effect it has on those around him. If you put on quite a show he may be inclined to say "no—no" more often. Also on some days, you may find yourself saying "no" all too frequently; in this case, Davy will only be imitating you.

If he says "no, no," and at the same time refuses to budge, you may get him over this hump by using a little humor. Pick him up and smilingly reply, "yes, yes." Few children can resist such attempts at fun. Taking hold of his hand and leading him rather than saying anything sometimes works. Diverting his attention to another activity rather than dwelling on the undesirable would be doubly effective.

As he grows to understand the meaning of words he will probably do a better job of fitting them into his vocabulary. If he continues to react negatively too much of the time it would be well to observe under what conditions he is most apt to respond this way.

In the meantime you can afford to overlook some of the "no's," and try to think more about what the words really mean to Davy.

Impatience:

"How should I deal with impatience in my child?"

This will depend upon the intensity of his feelings at the moment. As you know this may run all the way from whining to violent outbursts. It will also depend upon what caused him to be impatient.

Generally we should recognize that when something displeases a little child his reaction is immediate. He expresses his impatience or displeasure both instantly and outwardly. He does not try to hide his feelings as do adults.

Knowing that this is the way little children are, how can we handle impatience? Let's look at a few specific cases:

Situation: For the past several minutes you have been aware of Suzie's "I want a drink." With your hands in douch you keep saying, "Just a minute." This fails to satisfy Suzie as she whines and becomes quite demanding.

Cause: Suzie is impatient because, to children of this age, time passes slowly.

Suggestion: It will not help to scold Suzie, since to her, minutes seem like hours.

Neither should it be necessary for you to stop immediately what you are doing.

Give Suzie a drink as soon as you can conveniently manage it.

As Suzie gets a little older she will be able to wait a little longer and display a little more patience.

In the meantime try to close your ears to some of her impatience, particularly if the bawling will not take you too long.

Situation: Andy is trying to lace his shoe and is struggling to get the

shoelace through the eyelet. After trying very hard he screams and throws his shoe.

Cause: Andy is impatient because he is trying to learn a new skill.

Suggestion: At this point he may need a little help. You might put your hand on his and help him to guide the shoelace through the hole.

Or you might call his attention to something out of doors and give his fingers and his feelings a chance to relax.

Situation: Jeannie becomes impatient with Carol who is playing with one of her stuffed toys. She grabs the toy and pushes Carol to the floor.

Cause: In this case Jeannie's impatience stems from her lack of consideration for others.

Suggestion: Give her a little time to improve in this respect since children are not born generous and considerate.

In the meantime you might put the coveted toy away for a time.

Or you might try to provide similar toys for both children.

Or suggest another activity that might also be fun.

Displaying courtesy and kindness in handling the situation will help both girls to become more patient.

This letter suggests that:

"Through the eyes of little children" is a good beginning to handling most every day situations.

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CRAYON PAINTING

Remove wrappers from broken pieces of crayons and use them on their sides. With a large sheet of paper this will allow children to use wide arm motions much as in finger painting.

USE THOSE WAXED MILK CARTONS

The waxed cardboard from empty milk cartons can be used to make a whole fleet of boats. First cut the cardboard into an oblong, then shape the bow end. Make a slit in the middle and insert a sail, or color each boat and print its own license number on it.

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