

Skill-Building Opportunities

Preschool Yelling

Question: My child yells at me when she doesn't like what I tell her.

Oh dear, it starts early, doesn't it? But it's all a normal part of development. During the preschool years, your child is learning to become more independent in taking control of her life. Sometimes this may conflict with what you want and expect of her.

Help her learn how to respond without yelling by promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Think about how you respond to your child.

It is natural for your child's yelling to affect your feelings. As much as you can, try to be a role model in helping her learn to manage her behavior and communicate her feelings.

- Take time to think about how you respond when your child is yelling. What helps you manage your own feelings?
- Use a calm and very quiet voice instead of matching her volume and tone. Your child will have to listen closely and control her behavior to hear your words.
- Take a step back and take a few deep breaths if you feel upset before responding or, if possible, take some time away from the situation to calm down.
- Think about what else is going on. She may be hungry or tired.
- Let your child know that you are there for her and love her, even when she is upset and angry.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that you make sure to acknowledge your child when she handles difficult situations well.

2

Turn negatives into positives.

Think carefully about the way you ask your child to do things.

- Keep your interactions conversational. Avoid being too demanding or pleading.
- Think about how you like people to make requests of you. Ask your daughter how she likes to be asked to do things.

- Make positive requests. Instead of saying, “Put your shoes on,” try saying: “It’s time to put on your shoes so we can go.”
- Give limited choices. This is one way to help your child feel in control and learn to manage her behavior. Say something like: “Do you want to take two bites or three bites of your beans?”

When things go well try to remember to mention it to your daughter and celebrate the positive communication.

3

Help your child learn to express herself in ways that don’t involve yelling.

Instead of viewing her as willful or disobedient, remember that the preschool years provide great opportunities to help her learn to use more self-control. And, remember: this behavior is a normal part of development.

Tell her that you won’t let her yell at you, but you will help her learn other ways of telling you what she feels or wants. When you talk with her about how to do this, you help her learn to solve her own problems.

- Give her the space to express big emotions in ways that are appropriate.

Tell her: “It is not okay for you to yell at me, but if you feel like you need to yell, you can go into another room or yell at a stuffed animal.”

- Ask your child for her own ideas for managing behavior. What ideas can she come up with to help her control her yelling and to tell you what she wants in a way you can listen to?

Take her ideas seriously. Write them down and talk about them.

Select one of these ideas to try. Then if and when she yells at you, remind her that she had a great idea about sharing what she needs and wants, and to please use one of those ideas.

Using brain-imaging technology, Rebecca Saxe of MIT has found that the part of the brain used to understand the social world is still developing in the early years. Much of this has to do with children’s emerging skills of Focus and Self Control, which they are just developing during the preschool years.

4

Help your child see how her behavior affects you and others.

For both children and adults, Focus and Self Control are critical when it comes to relating to others. Although these skills develop over time, even the youngest children can begin to use them with adult support.

Provide this kind of support by using what researcher Martin Hoffman of New York University calls “other-oriented discipline.” In this approach, you encourage your child to step back from the situation and see how her behavior affects other people to help her respond more positively in the future.

You can say, “When you yell at me instead of talking, it’s hard for me to understand what you need.”