

Don't Say Don't
Marilyn Suttle



Don't, don't, don't. All day long, we tell our kids what we don't want them to do. "Don't play rough with the puppy." "Don't wake up your little sister." "Don't bounce your ball in the house." Do our kids listen? Sure, right after they pull the dog's tail, wake up the baby and bounce their ball onto the kitchen counter. Kids often seem compelled to do the very thing we tell them not to do. We can help our children become more cooperative by telling them what we do want.

Don't say don't. Whatever follows, "don't," will be the focus of your child's thoughts. Just like adults, children automatically think in pictures or images. When you tell a child, "Don't eat the cookies," they picture themselves eating cookies, before they process the don't. To see how it works, try this experiment yourself. As you are reading this article, don't think about a ten-pound giant red tomato. Don't do it! If even for a split second, you pictured a tomato in your mind, you are not alone. This illustrates the primary reason why telling kids what we don't want can backfire. We create a picture of the very thing we don't want our kids to do.

When kids go running down the halls at school, seasoned teachers refrain from calling out, "Don't run." Instead they say, "Walk!" This helps children picture themselves walking. It is easier to do what you picture yourself doing.

Often the images we think about become irresistible. While walking through a cactus park in Nevada, my six-year-old became fascinated with the fine, fuzzy looking needles of one variety of cactus. I warned him, "Don't touch that cactus or you'll get hurt." In less than a minute, he was holding a throbbing finger while crying out in pain, "It hurts! It hurts!" He later told me that he never even considered touching the cactus until I mentioned it. Then, he became so curious. He just couldn't help himself. He had to touch it. If instead of telling him what I didn't want, I focused on what I did want, his thoughts would have formed a completely different picture. What could I have said? How about, "Stay at least three steps away from the prickly cactus." Those words would have formed a completely different picture for him.

Kids often get trapped into playing negative roles. Parents reinforce those roles by focusing on the negative. Saying, "Don't forget to call me," implies that you expect your child to be forgetful. "Remember to call me," implies a more positive expectation. Replace, "Don't be late again," with, "Be on time." Replace, "Don't be sloppy," with, "Clean up after yourself." Kids see themselves more positively when our expectations are stated in the positive. By focusing on their capabilities we help our kids see themselves differently.

Focusing on what you don't want, can be confusing. It leaves kids unsure about what you really want from them. Suppose you say, "Don't misbehave at the restaurant." Is your child likely to behave? Without a clear understanding of what you want, she probably won't succeed. She may try to please you by singing with gusto. At home, she would be praised for breaking into song. At the restaurant, she gets shushed. By specifically telling her what she can do to meet your expectations, she is more likely to achieve positive attention for herself. Set her up to succeed by telling her what she can do, "At this restaurant, you can talk softly, play with the little toys we brought, and draw pictures while we wait for our food."

When you want to stop a negative behavior, replace it with a positive behavior. Telling your kids, "Don't interrupt me when I'm taking on the telephone," leaves them in a void. While you're on the phone, all they can picture themselves doing is interrupting you. By pointing out positive behavior options, they are less likely to interrupt you. Some suggestions might be, "When I'm on the phone, you can . . . play with your building toys . . . draw me a picture . . . write me a note . . . hug me while you wait quietly . . . give me a hand signal when you have something important to ask me." Focusing on positive behaviors helps kids to meet your expectations and feel good about themselves.

When telling your children what you want them to do, be specific and break down large tasks into manageable sized tasks. Replace, "Don't leave that mess in your room," with, "Be sure to put your toys back in the toy box and your dirty clothes in the hamper." By clearly and specifically stating your expectations in the positive, kids are empowered to do what needs to be done.

Feel free to reprint this article in your publication or newsletter with the following byline: Marilyn Suttle shows you how to create happier family and work relationships. She is a dynamic speaker, author and columnist. Subscribe to her FREE monthly e-newsletter: Life in Balance: Thriving Kids/Thriving Parents, by visiting her web site: WWW.SuttleOnline.NET. © 2005 Suttle Enterprises LLC.