

Engaging Cooperation

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If you're a parent, you probably spend a lot of time telling your children what to do: "wake up," "brush your teeth," "take out the trash," "clean your room." And when you're not telling them what to do, you're telling them what NOT to do: "don't be late," "don't spill it," "don't fight with your brother."

Sometimes it may seem you should have been a drill sergeant instead of a mom or dad! The home becomes a battleground as parents and children bicker over who is going to do what and when. You try accusing, name calling, threatening, ordering, and lecturing. If the job remains undone, you are frustrated, to say the least. And even if the work does get done, the children's bad feelings are pervasive as you experience a hollow "victory."

The skills I am about to describe work on the premise that children are intelligent enough to figure out what needs to be done once they are aware of the situation. Even if you're not totally convinced this is true, try acting as if you were and you'll be amazed at how your children will rise to the occasion. Children would rather take the initiative to do something *they've* thought of, and often resent being ordered around. These skills encourage children's maturation and eventual autonomy. They also detach you emotionally from the situation so that it is more difficult for you to be manipulated into an argument.

The first skill you can use to engage children's cooperation is to simply describe the problem. "The light is on." "The bunny looks hungry." "Your sneakers are on the floor." Often this is enough to motivate a youngster into action. When we attack a child with, "How many times have I told you to turn off the light? You never learn!" or "Your poor bunny is going to starve to death – you don't deserve to have a pet!" or "You're such a slob-put your sneakers away NOW," he feels a need to defend himself. When we describe a problem without insulting him his energies are available to correct the situation.

Another skill you can use is to give information. "Leaving the lights on wastes electricity." "Pets need to eat every day." "Sneakers belong in the closet." Information is a lot more palatable than lectures, accusations, and threats. However, if you've already given this information several times before, try just using a single word. "Kids, the LIGHT!" or "the BUNNY" or "your SNEAKERS" is often more effective than paragraphs of information.

Another approach is to describe how you feel. "It bothers me to see the lights left on" or "I feel sorry for the hungry bunny in our family" or "I'm furious! I just tripped over your sneakers and dropped the bag of groceries!" are all ways to let a child know how you feel without insulting her. If you've shown her that you care for her feelings, chances are she'll be concerned about your feelings as well. Strong adverse feelings from you which are not directed toward a child's character will usually evoke a response which solves the problem. No energy will be wasted in excuses or defenses. Most children will simply act.

Using the above skills and perhaps a little humor, you can also write a note to resolve problems. Hang a note by the light switch: "Turn Me Off." A sign can be posted where the children see it at feeding time that says, "It's not funny for a bunny to be hungry." And you can place a note on top of the sneakers in the middle of the living room floor which states, "Sneakers should be 'on the foot,' not 'under foot'." One of the nice things about notes is that they give you time to think about what you want to say. Instead of reacting with threats and insults and then regretting your ineffectiveness, you can act rationally and resolve the conflict.

For more insights into these skills, please read [How to Talk so Kids Will Listen & Listen so Kids Will Talk](#) by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish. Need some personalized help for your kids and your family? Please call CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services about counseling services and a residential option for adolescents. (352) 244-0628 or 0618. www.cdsfl.org