



## **Say NO to “NO!” and Raise a Smarter Child**

**By Judy Arnall**

“NO!” It’s probably the most commonly used word in parenting! It flies out of our mouths before we even have time to really think about what we are saying “no” to. Often, it’s when we are stressed, tired and overwhelmed and we just don’t want to deal with another request that might cost us time, energy, money or some other demand upon us. Or we say “no” because we think we ought to as parents. Our parents said it to us and it’s in the Parent Script! However, that doesn’t mean it’s always appropriate. In fact, saying “no” can stilt our children and crush their spirit. By the time a child enters school they have heard the word “no” said to them, 18, 256 times. If that isn’t a killer of initiative, I don’t know what is.

What do you say instead of “no!”? Say “Let’s find out!” “Let’s see what happens!” “Let’s try it.” Or when it’s definitely “no”, say, “Yes, later.” Which means you can always rethink your answer.

We were on holidays in England visiting my Brother-in-law’s house and specifically, his bathroom. Of course, when one has to change a two-year-olds diaper, the five-year-old sibling needs to come to check out the “loo” too. My five-year-old son wanted to know the inner mysterious workings of the toilet tank. We lifted the lid and flushed and looked inside. It was fascinating to a five-year-old and I must admit that I have never had the opportunity to really see how a toilet flushed either. When my Brother-in-law came in through the open door, he was horrified! Visitors just do not lift people’s toilet lids to look inside. Maybe it was a Canadian thing, but it certainly was not done in England! “But its educational!” I protested. He was not amused. Obviously, his children had never been allowed to look inside their toilet tank.

I later mulled this over. Had I done something wrong? Did it damage the toilet? No. Did it hurt anybody? No. Why would most parents say “no” if their children asked to look in the tank? Did they really stop to think about why not? “No” is said just because that’s what parents always say.

Children are curious and nothing satisfies their quest for knowledge better than hands-on experience. When my other son, again, five, wanted to grow an egg tree, I watched him get the eggs from the fridge, and take his little sandbox shovel and dig a hole in the back yard to plant his egg. I watched him water it every day and check to see if anything was growing. I wasn’t about to damper his enthusiasm, initiative and persistence by “warning” him that it wouldn’t work and “no” he couldn’t do it. As a parent, I don’t like to deal with the fall out from children’s disappointment when things don’t work, but experiencing knowledge first hand from his own efforts, does many wonderful things for him. It gives him self-esteem knowing that he can do things to satisfy his curiosity. It gives him knowledge of outcomes that he discovers himself (often the best kind) and not from a naysayer like me. It gives him confidence to take risks and learns that it’s okay to make mistakes. In fact, mistakes are necessary for learning. It also tells him that the sky is the limit as long as experimenting doesn’t hurt people or things or compromise reasonable safety and health. I say “reasonable” because children need to take risks in childhood in order to learn. We can’t restrict them too much or bubble-wrap them in the name of safety because they won’t discover their own limits. A child that is told “no” too often will take those same risks undercover without adult supervision and that could be unsafe and unhealthy. When my son discovered the egg just rotted and didn’t grow anything, he wasn’t as disappointed as I feared. He was excited that he learned something new. And even if he had been disappointed, it would have been a great opportunity to help him deal with his feelings - more learning!

When my friend’s six-year-old daughter wanted to erect a lemonade stand in –20 degree weather in front of her house, I was thinking most parents (including me) would say “no”. Instead, she said “yes”, thinking the child would learn from natural consequences that most people wouldn’t buy lemonade in –20. Apparently my friend was wrong. That little girl made more money that day from drivers applauding her diligence and motivation than if it had been 30 degrees above.

Just saying “no” to no doesn’t mean that you are a permissive parent. It means you are a smart parent that allows your children to live life to the fullest. You say “no” when you absolutely feel you need to, such as the case of real health or safety issues. Permissive parents are parents that never say “no”, even when they know they really should. You can say “yes” thirty times a day, and not be a permissive parent as long as that one time you really feel you need to say “no”, you say it and stay with it.

Saying “Yes” will help your child develop the following skills:

**Leadership and cooperation:** If your child can rally allies on his quest, even better!

**Self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence:** You show that you accept them for who they are and they become secure in the knowledge that they can take healthy risks. Let “You can do it!” be your mantra.

**Oral expression:** Let them tell you their hypothesis, and explanations, and ideas to their questions. Listen intently and focused and ask more questions.

**Initiative:** Avoid squelching their ideas even if they seem far-fetched. Encourage negotiation and problem-solving to handle the logistics of what they want to do, if the plan is inconvenient for you

**Creativity:** Supply them with what they need, add encouragement, and let them go at their projects. Encourage them to think outside the box.

**Problem Solving:** Encourage them to think of an answer to their conundrums. Don't offer an answer. Ask questions to lead them to ideas.

**Curiosity:** Encourage questions. What if? How? What do you think would happen? Answer their questions with another question to help them discover the answer.

**Motivation:** They feel that they can do anything if they have a great idea.

**Persistence:** Model the benefits of persistence in your own life and acknowledge the effort of persistence when they show it. If they ask several times to do something, they really, really want to do it.

The world needs children to grow up into inventors, leaders and problem-solvers. We need to train them early to think outside the box, run with their hunches, take risks, make mistakes, and keep at solving unseemingly unsolvable problems. Say “no” to “no”. Instead, say “YES!”

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