

Hot Stoves & Big Trucks

How to Say “No” with Love

Few parents have any problem pulling a 3-year old back from a hot stove or from running into the street. Why, then, do parents and educators have such difficulty pulling the same child back from imminent or long-term danger when they become 14?

Maybe it’s because the 3-year old never turns to the parent to make their case for touching the hot stove. “Oh, Mom, you just hate me, and I hate you, too.” Or, “But, Mom, I really need to get my hands on that burner—my friends all did it and they’ve got these really cool scars on their hands now!” Or maybe it’s because we feel so much more confident that the child’s best interest lies clearly in our action. There’s little room for compromise on the hot stove.

Failing to draw boundaries for adolescents is just as crippling to their emotional and social development as getting run over by a truck is for their physical well-being. It represents our own unresolved emotional needs, and serves only to save us from our fear that we’re not sure what we’re doing. It represents a complete abdication of the adult or parenting role, producing a role reversal, in which the adult becomes the learner and the child’s status is artificially elevated to that of adult. She begins to think that s/he is in charge, whether it be the home, the classroom, or the world.

When the child is in charge, his or her lack of skill and experience leads to poor decision-making, including taking serious risks so serious that they can jeopardize their education (skipping school), their chances of developing healthy friendships with peer and supportive adults (engaging in conflict), and even their economic future (failure to develop work/study habits conducive to the job market).

We pull the child back from the hot stove or out of the street because:

We love them and don’t want them to get hurt or be in pain
We understand thermodynamics better than they do & how much a truck weighs because we’ve cooked and we’ve driven
We know what a bad burn feels like and we’ve seen enough crashes (or been in them) to know how painful it would be
We’ve seen or heard of other people being badly burned or run over

The fact that the child may resist our pulling, or be mad because we restricted them doesn’t bother us, because listening to their wailing for one minute doesn’t even compare to the true pain, crying and misery of getting burned or run over.

The educational equivalent of this is:

We make kids follow the rules because we know or have seen people who never learned to do it and who make terrible decisions (dropping out of school or quitting jobs,

abusing their spouse or kids) and have miserable lives as a result. They lack social skills and can't fit themselves into society well enough to succeed at anything for very long. They never really learned how the world works.

So, be empowered. Don't let our kids fall to that fate. Give them a priceless gift—the skill of assessing the situation themselves to determine what is in their best interest. Teach them how to make good judgments by practicing small ones first. Never let them make decisions in which the short-term gains (curiosity, peer adoration, or extra sleep) are more evident to them than the true cost (flunking a class, smoking dope, or skipping school).

HOW DO WE SAY “NO” WITHOUT FEELING SO BAD?

Say it with love in your voice: *“Honey, I just can't let you do that, it's not a good idea.”*

Say it with an explanation of why it's a bad idea. *“You need to be in class instead of in the hall. There's no teaching going on in the hallways.”*

Say it by including the big picture: *“No, you can't call your cousin down because that new boy “dissed” you. We need a safe school--we can't have a bunch of craziness & fighting in the lunchroom.”*

Say it by affirming their long-term interest. *“No, I won't forget about the graffiti you wrote all over the bathroom. Everybody deserves a decent school to go to.”*

Acknowledge their confusion, pain, or anger. *“I know you're mad, but fighting about it will just make things worse and get you suspended.”*

Reassure them that as an adult, you care about them. *“I care about you and I'm not going to let you miss your opportunity to be eligible for basketball.”*

Remind them that they are not the only ones in the world. *“Sit down, because the other students won't be able to see the performers.”*

Appeal to their sense of fairness (an ideal very important to adolescents): *“I know you're a good rapper, but it's not fair for other students to have to listen to all that racket when we are trying to review for our exam that starts in 10 minutes.”*

Tell them how to accomplish their need in a better way: *“I know you need to talk to your Mom, but you may call her after school.”*

What do we do when they whine or beg? “Tell them: “Stop begging, It's undignified,” and repeat the loving “No” again without acrimony or any aggravated tone in your voice. You don't have to justify your decision—you are the adult in charge. Don't make excuses (“I would do it, but Mr. X says I can't.”) That just makes the student think that you don't have any real power, or that begging someone else would get them the answer they want to hear.

Saying “No” with love is critical to raising or teaching healthy, happy kids. It's the right thing to do, and it gets much easier with practice.