

JACK'S CORNER

QUESTION: It seems like my wife and I are always saying “no” to our kids. My wife is worried about their self-image. I believe we have good reasons for saying no. Give us your thoughts.

ANSWER: In my opinion, children need to hear “no” (meaning not being allowed to do whatever they want and not always getting their own way) **about 4-6 times more** than they need to hear “yes”. I believe this is especially true with most suburban kids who live a privileged lifestyle when it comes to activity, opportunity, and stuff. If we as parents **truly** want what is best for our children in the long haul of life, we must and will understand the **character-shaping value of saying no**.

Often, selfishly and myopically, parents give in to their children to ease the emotional demands of the moment (the *It's not worth the hassle* rationale). Often, because we parents were told no so often by our parents, there is a well-meaning, but terribly flawed, determination to say yes to our kids (the *I will raise my kids differently* rationale). Often, we say yes to our children just because we are financially able to (the *I can afford it* rationale). Often, we say yes because we don't have the strength to see our children sad (the *happiness is more important than anything* rationale). Often, we say yes because we believe anything negative will damage their self-esteem (the *self-esteem* is the answer to everything* rationale).

None of these rationales is godly, wise or beneficial in the long run. Sadly, many parents believe they are highly valuing their children by giving them everything they want and never saying no. Such parenting creates monsters.

In the short-term, your home will be a series of battleground skirmishes with you always losing. You and your wife will frequently argue about how to handle the kids. The marriage may erode. Your “yes's” will have taught your children to continually act out until they get their way. They will know they can outlast you (just wait until they are teens). Discipline and disappointment outside of the home will be a significant struggle for such children. Their friendships will tend to be shallow, fickle and manipulative. In such circumstances, fathers will often give up, disengage, and abdicate their leadership when it comes to parenting. Mothers will be exhausted, resentful of their husbands, and heartbroken.

The long-term effects of always hearing yes after yes will produce children who are narcissistic and addicted to pleasure. They will be self-absorbed adolescents at 40, unable and unwilling to maintain marriages and parent children of their own. Unappreciative and immature they will often flounder in a victim or entitlement attitude and lifestyle. They will be at greater risk for depression and substance abuse. If they have any kind of relationship with God, it will be dependent upon how often God says “yes” to their selfish prayers.

As you said, there are “good reasons for saying no”. **Saying no helps kids understand that the world is not here just for them.** It helps kids invest themselves in the lives of others. The value of sacrifice and doing what is right can truly be recognized and appreciated. It instills the hard-learned value of long-term gratification.

Saying no sets limits and boundaries just like God does for mankind. It reinforces your strength and conviction in the eyes of your children and lets them know that someone can handle them (children both need and want to be handled). It demonstrates your passion for eternal things rather than fleeting earthly pleasures. It prepares them for life in the real world and makes them value and enjoy whatever blessings they do receive in this life. How many adults do you know that needed to hear a few more “no’s” when they were growing up?

If you do a good job of saying “no” at the right times with your young children, and they knew that your “no’s” were because you truly loved them (not because you were simply irritated and angry), you should be able to gradually reduce the number of “no’s” when they get older (if they have internalized a godly value system). As parents of teens, you will have to choose your battles carefully, let the natural consequences of life teach them, and step back in faith, trusting in the life-skills and faith-skills instilled by you.

God says yes to us in some awesome ways. Grace, through faith in Jesus, is the biggest yes we could ever imagine! But in this fallen world, and because of our sinful nature, God knows that we need lots of “no’s”.

* Self-esteem is better built by personal accomplishment with hard work, maintaining convictions, and a relationship with the Savior than it is by hearing a mantra of unearned and undeserved “yes’s”.

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