



Big Kid Voice

Do your kids sometimes demand things or whine? How can you go about teaching young kids to make requests politely?

Starting Out

Your child will occasionally demand that you pick him up, or whine for something he wants, like a cookie. Every time you respond to the whining or demands you are reinforcing his poor manners. Next time he yells, “Juice!” like you’re an employee of his that he’s unhappy with, try cuing him to use his manners by saying, “Big kid voice.” If he’s not sure what to say, you can model for him how you want him to say it. Say what you expect him to say in order to get what he wants, and say it in the tone you are wanting him to say it in: For instance, you might say,

Giving your child what she asks for only after she’s used her “Big Girl Voice” makes it much easier for her to remember to be polite.

“Juice please,” in a upbeat voice. Once he imitates you (or comes reasonably close given his developmental level), *then* give him the juice. If you are consistent with this, the odds grow that your child will remember to use polite words when he asks you for something. It will make him feel more secure that he’s talking to you kindly.

This technique can really surprise onlookers in public. One mother was taking a break at a shopping mall with her 3-year-old when the girl demanded, “I want crackers,” in a cranky tone. Her mother smiled and didn’t respond for a second, which made her daughter curious. Then she said quietly, “Big girl voice.” The girl asked again immediately in a polite tone that was amazingly different from first time she’d asked, “Crackers, please,” which sounded more like “Crackers peas”. The mother happily handed gave her daughter a couple crackers. People sitting beside them may have been amazed at this instant change in tone on her daughter’s part. They might have wondered what it was about this phrase that made it work like magic. The truth is, it was due to the mother taking the trouble to be consistent, and keeping in mind that the temptation to hand the daughter something just to appease her is short term thinking that derails her daughter’s long term polite behavior.

More Ideas

Once you get the hang of this, you may be able to teach your child to respond to more subtle cues such as, “*You forgot a word,*” or “*You’re forgetting*”



something.” It can be fun to eventually respond to impolite demands with, “*Guess what?*” At first, your child will likely respond with, “*What?*” You can then smile silently, or you can even ask again, “*Guess what?*” After a while, when you say, “*Guess what?*” your child is likely to make his request with politeness.

Teaching Politeness Rudely?

Haim Ginott, the child psychiatrist famous for his ability to communicate with children, observed that, “You can’t teach politeness rudely.” If we want our kids to use polite words and a respectful tone of voice, it is in our interest to talk to them in a manner that models what we expect from them. When parents don’t say *please* or *thank you* when speaking to their children, yet expect to hear it from them, they are likely to have kids who conclude that *please* and *thank you* are words that adults want kids to use, but that they are words adults don’t use themselves. Since the kids want to be big like the adults, they’re likely to decide that they’ll talk the way the parent does to them, without polite words.