

# How can we teach our children to be disciplined

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מאת: [חלי ברק](#)

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Dear parents,

See how well-behaved I am: You ask and I answer. You call, and here I am. That's discipline, isn't it? Well then, why do you say I'm undisciplined?

**I think my discipline is entirely your responsibility.**

I looked it up in the dictionary and discovered that discipline is a process whereby an authority figure tells someone subject to his or her authority what to do, and that person obeys even if he or she doesn't agree with the demand. Because you are the adults, you hold the authority, and you are the ones who should find a way to get me to obey even when I don't want to. It doesn't make sense to blame me for being undisciplined. When I have children of my own, the discipline problems will be mine; for now, if you aren't succeeding with my discipline, it's your responsibility. It's not my fault that I'm more effective than you are and that I manage to dodge your demands.

## **I'm highly skilled at resisting your disciplinary demands.**

Do you know how much effort I put into honing my ability to battle your discipline? You should be proud of my creativity and cleverness. I think, I plan, I try out different methods, I draw conclusions from past experience, and I continually improve. If only I invested the same amount of effort in school, I would be a straight-A student for sure.

For example, when I was little I discovered that the method of crying a little bit works with Mom; she gives in right away. With Dad, it works when I say "OK," but do nothing. After a few attempts, he gives up. I've learned from experience what to do when you yell (keep quiet) and what to do when you threaten (don't get upset, because you won't do anything anyway). I invest enormous effort in succeeding in doing what's best for me, rather than what you demand. Sometimes I win in the discipline battles between us, and I refuse to apologize or feel guilty for your failures.

**You waste your energy** on complaining and yelling. You're insulted and frustrated when I don't obey you. You get angry: "Why can't you get up right away when we wake you in the morning?!" "How can you keep throwing that ball around in the living room?!" You're surprised when I don't get up to shower right in the middle of my favorite TV show, when I dare to leave my room messy while I stay at the computer instead of cleaning up, when I give you such a hard time, and you don't understand why.

**The truth is that your expectations of me are unreasonable, and that's why you're angry all the time.** You want me to do unpleasant things with enthusiasm; you want me to smile, to agree with you, not to argue or resist. You don't understand that that will never happen! Even if your demands are justified, I don't want them, because they aren't fun for me. I don't want to shower, because I don't like the water. I try to stay up late because watching TV is fun. I don't come to the table right away because just then I'm busy doing something that's much more interesting to me. Believe me, if you told me to come with you for a day of fun at the amusement park, I would obey right away. I would even take responsibility for the outing and remind you to leave on time. Why? Because when something is important to me I take responsibility for it on my own; and when something isn't, I don't.

**My advice: Stop expecting me to obey unpleasant demands quickly and willingly.** It's a waste of your expectations, anger, and disappointment, and it just won't happen!

## **Stop complaining and start being effective if you want to succeed at discipline.**

You claim it's impossible to set boundaries for me; I say you don't know how to set boundaries. You claim it's impossible to say **no** to me; I say you don't know how to say **no**. Learn to say **no** decisively, learn to set boundaries for me, learn to argue with me. Don't back down when there are hardships along the way, don't be afraid of anger and struggles, and don't get upset about every resistance or stunt of mine – they're part of the process. Be more effective and creative with your methods for imposing discipline on me. Get angry less and plan more, and you will be successful, for the good of all of us.

**You might not believe this, but I want to live in a disciplined home.**

I may not jump to obey discipline of my own volition (for the reasons I explained above), but I do want boundaries in my life. It's good for me to live in an orderly reality, with some things allowed and some forbidden. Clear rules are good for me!

**I need boundaries, because they give me security and protection.** As a baby, I was already seeking boundaries. Remember how I clung to the edges of my crib, to feel the limits of it, like in the womb? Later, as I grew, I wanted you to tell me what was right and wrong, and I wanted to know that what was right one day would still be right the next day; I need consistency, because it is calming. I need to know what to do, and what happens if I don't do what I should. That way the world becomes comprehensible and safe for me.

I want to know that you're strong and that you can guide me. Otherwise, who can I trust to soothe and protect me? Living without discipline and boundaries is scary. If you can't set boundaries for me, I have to constantly check for myself what's right and wrong; as a child, this is a task that's too big, too hard, and too frightening for me. I don't want it!

**Your discipline teaches me habits:** cleanliness and order, manners, thoughtfulness, restraint, organization, adapting to rules. These are extremely important skills for me to master, both at home and outside, with friends and at school. There are rules everywhere, and I need to know how to cope with them in order to succeed and be happy.

**If there is no discipline, I win in the short term; but in the long term I lose in a big way.** If I grow up in a home without good discipline, I may develop into a confused child who doesn't know what is right or wrong and who can't trust adults. I may lack confidence and feel guilty, because I constantly experienced anger in response to being undisciplined. I may grow up to be demanding and spoiled, with the (obviously mistaken) belief that the entire world should serve me. I may not be able to handle rules and social norms because I was never taught to adapt.

I will pay the price for my undisciplined childhood for the rest of my life. Whose responsibility is that? Yours. I'm not trying to attack or blame you. I want to explain, to restore responsibility to you for teaching me discipline. I love you so much! To win your love, I'm even willing to obey you when I don't feel like it. That's nice of me, isn't it?

So make no mistake: I desperately need your discipline and boundaries; without them I can't develop. That doesn't contradict the fact that I apply all of my energy and creativity to avoid obeying your discipline. Confusing? Not to me. It's like a game, in which each of us has to play our part. You need to impose discipline on me, because that's your job as adults. And I need to test the boundaries – that's my job. You have to win, because in the end there must be discipline. For your good and for mine.

I also want to explain the kind of discipline I need from you. I want discipline where within all of the "no" there is also some "yes." Know what you want, because that gives me confidence, but don't go too far. Don't trap me in a narrow cage of limits and prohibitions. That way I won't be able to develop my own motivation. Let me feel that I have some impact on the rules. Let me

argue with you, and sometimes win; maybe I *can* decide what I wear. Give me options to choose from, such as which after-school activities I participate in. Be strong, but don't break me; let me feel strong too. It's for the good of all of us.

### **Now, some practical discipline tips:**

#### **What Not to Do**

**Don't shout and don't threaten.** Your anger only makes noise and isn't effective. As a small child, I may fear your yelling and threats, but I quickly learn that your bark is worse than your bite. I can see from experience that aside from yelling and threatening, you never do anything to me, so it stops having any effect on me. I feel bad because I feel like you hate me, but I get used to it. I close my ears to stop hearing your yelling, I wait for you to get tired of threatening, and I go on doing things my own way. I'm usually stronger, and you tire before I do and give in. When I'm really big – as a teenager – yelling doesn't affect me at all. What will you do then? Hit me?

**Don't hit me.** Even when you're really furious and don't know what else to do to get me to listen. Hitting is the solution of the cowardly and the weak. That's right. You're exploiting the only advantage you have over me at that moment: your physical size. In that moment of hitting, your brain isn't working, and only your hands are left to solve the problem. What have you gained? I may obey at that moment, because I have no choice. But I'm hurt and insulted, I hate you for the humiliation, and I sometimes decide to take revenge on you and not listen to you anymore. It's a clear path to more battles and struggles where everyone loses. Besides, in many places hitting is against the law. If you have any self-control, don't hit. Not even a little educational tap. It looks little to you, but in my experience as a child your hitting is always huge and painful. And anyway, like yelling and threats, hitting is something you get used to; it stops being effective. What will you do when hitting stops working? What will you do if I start hitting back? It never ends, so it's best to stop before the first time. If you can't do this alone, please get help.

**Also try not to insult me.** Insults are like hitting with your mouth. When I make you mad, you say words to me that are so insulting and humiliating that they keep shouting at me in my head hours later, when the actual discipline problem has long since ended. I think you yourself might have a hard time believing that you've really said things to me like, "You're horrible / so stupid / a monster," "I'll throw you out of this house," "I hate you," "I'm gonna beat you up." If anyone else spoke to me that way you would be very angry with them. But you're allowed to punish me for discipline infractions by savaging my character and my feelings. Does that sound overly dramatic to you? Believe me, when you attack me with your full rage and humiliate me, I truly feel like I'm being taken apart. I don't deserve that kind of punishment even when I disobey you.

## **What To Do**

**The first step is to dial down your anger so that you can think and act reasonably.**

I know this is easier said than done. But you get so mad and stressed that you lose your head. You have to find it again! You need to remember that achieving discipline is a difficult struggle for everyone, but it will allow you to waste less energy on anger and despair, leaving you more energy and brains to deal with the actual discipline.

**In order to succeed, you must keep your discipline expectations of me realistic.**

**Don't expect me to obey every demand.** Like all children, I hear so many demands every day; I'm not a robot, so I screen some of them out. I obey some but not others. That's normal. Admit it – you don't always do everything you're told to, and you don't obey every rule. I can see for myself how you run yellow lights, how you're sometimes late for work, and how lax your own discipline is when it comes to diet and exercise. Don't deny it; it's human.

**Remember that some degree of discipline violation benefits development.**

A child who is like an obedient robot may be convenient for parents during childhood, but excessive obedience comes at a price in the long term. These children are always doing what their parents want, rather than what they want and need. They may not learn to be independent, proactive, and creative, or to follow their own opinions. They may always need to be told what to do. Never having learned to stand up for themselves and resist some of what others tell them, they may fear argument and anger in the future, because they got no practice as children. I don't want to be that child, and I hope you don't want that either. That's why I suggest that you should be content with obedience to only part of your demands.

**Try to see seventy or eighty percent obedience as one hundred percent success.**

**Think in advance about what is reasonable to demand of me.**

Be smart, not just right. After all, you know me, and you should already know what works and what doesn't work. So even if your demand is fair and reasonable, let it go if there's no chance it will work with me. For example, if I am the kind of child who has trouble stopping an activity, telling me to clean my room when I'm in the middle of watching a TV show is unwise and pointless. It's better to wait for a break between programs and then demand that I do what you ask. There's a better chance that your demand will be met.

**Don't expect me to obey your demands immediately.**

I'm not a machine, with a button you can push to make me jump. It takes me time to stop doing something pleasant in order to do the unpleasant thing that you're asking for. The problem is that you start to explode and yell after just a few seconds. I haven't even had a chance to move yet, and you're already roaring: "How many times have I told you!" and, "You never do as you're told!" True, sometimes I exhaust you on purpose (I admit), but mostly I just need some time to

pull myself together, and you don't have the patience for it. When you start to shout, it activates my opposition mechanism. Even if I hadn't planned to resist, if you are forceful with me I become forceful in return. A fight forms when there was no need for one.

For example: I'm watching TV, and you want me to go clean my room. You tell me once and I ignore you. You tell me a second time, and I say, "Just a minute," and keep doing my own thing. You yell at me, and I say "I don't want to." You threaten to ground me for a week, and I smile and say, "I don't care." You're furious by now and you scream, "Wipe that smile off your face, you're impossible!" I whine, "You're always getting on my case." You yell, "Fine, keep your room a mess. I'm sick of it, just do whatever you want." What happened here? I pushed the right buttons to annoy you. I knew exactly what to do to get you to stop thinking logically. I won; you gave in. No discipline achieved.

On the other hand, if you could stay calm and focused on your goal – getting me to clean my room – you could tell me in a decisive voice to do so, not pay attention to my reaction, and be surprised to find out how I obey eventually.

**Know that while I should obey you, I don't have to agree with your demands.** That's why it makes sense for me to whine and complain, and that doesn't mean I won't obey you. It's very important for you not to be confused about this. Have I done as you asked? If so, you've succeeded, and I've succeeded in meeting your disciplinary demand. I grumbled, I complained, I gave you some trouble along the way – that's unpleasant, but it isn't the main point. It's my duty to obey, and it's my right to complain about it. Don't get upset by my protests and annoyance, and don't waste all your energy being mad or disappointed with me because I didn't get in the shower with a happy smile on my face. Focus your energy on getting me to take that shower, while ignoring my annoyance. When I finally go, you can say: "I saw how badly you didn't want to go shower, and you finally went – good job." A kind word is always helpful. Remember that.

**Stop being upset about my getting angry with you at times.** So what if I'm angry at you right now and think you're the worst parents on earth? It makes sense in the moment because you've made me mad by asking me to do something I didn't want to do. But it doesn't mean I don't love you. You can't be alarmed by every response of mine; it weakens you, and eventually me as well. Remember the words of Mark Twain: *"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."* I promise, I always love you, even when I'm mad; don't be so scared of me, and focus on seriously imposing discipline on me. You need all of your strength to do that, and you shouldn't waste it on getting angry and taking offense.

Are your disciplinary expectations in order? Great. Let's move on to techniques.

## **Techniques: How to Communicate Disciplinary Requirements**

**State your disciplinary requirement clearly and unambiguously.**

Tell me once: "Go take a shower when that TV show is over, please." Be brief, polite, and respectful. Don't make suggestions: "How about taking a shower?" because my opinion may be negative; don't express an opinion: "I think you should go take a shower," because I may disagree. Just say it. If I ignore your demand, repeat it, and after few more minutes quietly walk over to the television and turn it off. Say to me, calmly and assertively: "You're going to go take a shower now." Don't fall into my traps; if I scream and argue, don't scream back and don't argue with me. It's important for you to teach me to obey first and argue later. That's very important for later in life – to learn that not everything is to be argued, and that some things just need to be done. So insist on your demand in a pleasant tone. Say: "You're taking a shower now. If you don't like it, we can discuss it later." Stay by me so I can't avoid you, and lead me to the shower if necessary. Don't be rude, but make an unequivocal, authoritative demand.

**State your disciplinary requirement quietly and calmly, and tell me ahead of time to give me a while to get organized.** Statements like, "In ten minutes you need to get in the shower," or "We'll sit down to dinner when that TV show is over," are pleasant and help me obey. If the time you set has passed and I still try to procrastinate, then you can become more assertive and resolute, and insist that I carry out your instructions. Sometimes you might have to repeat each demand three times, but if you don't get mad it won't take too much effort.

**Stop arguing with me so much; it only persuades me that you aren't sure of yourself and that I'm about to win.** Phrase your requirement concisely, explain it once, and don't try to convince me. Even if I disagree with you, I will have to obey. That's what discipline is about – doing things you may not want to do. That's what I need to learn. When you start to argue and talk a lot, it means you aren't sure of your demand; it means it's up for discussion, and I have a chance to change your mind. That's not good for discipline. If you've decided I need to take a shower, insist in a pleasant way. Don't be afraid of my reactions and don't enter into an argument with me to try to convince me that you're right. I'm much better at arguing than you are, after all. Be firm, and my esteem for you will grow.

**One last thing: Decide in advance on your response if I don't obey.** Don't prepare your response at the last minute, while you're upset; think ahead about what you will do if I say no, or if I just ignore you. After all, my discipline problems repeat; why not improve with experience? Here's an example: Every Tuesday, Mom threatens that if I'm not ready by a quarter to four, she won't give me a ride to my karate class. Every Tuesday, I'm not ready on time. Mom yells, but she still waits for me and takes me to class. Why? Because it's so important for Mom that I get to the karate class, to improve my self-confidence (as she always says), that it's worth it for her to give in to me. Mom, how will I ever learn to be on time if I never pay a price for being late? I think that if once or twice Mom were to leave me at home, I would get the hint and start being ready on time. There's no need to yell; all she has to do is make sure that logically it isn't worth it for me to be late. Believe me, it works. I can tell when you really mean it and when it isn't worth it for me to go against your demands; that's when I obey. Other times, I disobey because I can tell that you are confused and weak. So please – be clear and firm.

**Don't give me arbitrary or cruel punishments, but make sure there are natural unpleasant consequences for my discipline violations.**

A cruel or arbitrary punishment is one that you hand out after the fact, when I've behaved badly. It's a punishment designed to hurt and insult me – for example, when you say I can't watch TV for a month, or I can't go to an important party, or that you'll take away my phone. It's humiliating as well as ineffective, because you usually cave in along the way and don't carry out your threats.

A natural consequence for my actions is also an unpleasant reaction, but more effective. That's when you tell me in advance what will happen if I don't obey, preferably something important to me; then, if I choose to disobey, I pay the price. The punishment should be short, allowing me to remedy the situation afterwards.

For example: I didn't clean up my room as we had agreed, so I can't watch a favorite TV show. Even if I get really mad, I realize that I knew in advance what was in store if I misbehaved. If you don't give in, I'll learn through experience that next time I'd better clean up my room.

To discipline me well you need to know me and know what makes me tick. You can't get upset, even if I shout that I don't care. I probably do care; I'm only trying to get you to weaken.

### **In conclusion, here is a summary of my recommendations on discipline:**

- **Think ahead** about your disciplinary demands.
- **State your demands firmly** and resolutely.
- **Don't feel sorry for me and don't give in.** Be assertive and fair; that way, chances are that I'll obey you. I'm a reasonable person.
- **Don't stop demanding even when it gets difficult.** On the contrary – teach me how to do things that I don't like.

You believe I can do it, don't you? I'm not saying it's easy to discipline me, but it's possible.

**I'm asking you to please be authoritative parents.** Tell me what to do, but be respectful. Be nice, but don't try to be my buddies. I don't need more friends; I need parents to watch over me, otherwise I'm like an orphan.

Most important: Even in the midst of the discipline wars, please remember that I'm your beloved child and that you are my beloved parents. Right now we're fighting over our incongruent interests, but even in battle you can be fair and decent, and still win. If you don't stick to this principle, when I grow up and the struggles over discipline are long since over, the scars of the fights will remain. It will be harder to maintain closeness and trust between us; that's no less important in our relationship, don't you think?

### **Parents' Questions by Age Group**



### **\*Birth to one year: When should we start teaching our baby to sleep through the night?**

Nine-month-old Joel's parents ask, "*At what age can we expect Joel to do as he's told? We're trying to get him to sleep through the night, but we haven't succeeded. He wakes up at least two or three times every night. At his age, can we get him on a more regular sleep schedule, or is he still too little?*"

#### **An answer from Joel:**

You're annoyed that I don't have regular habits. You believe that I could sleep better if I would only try. I want to let you know that you're mistaken. I try, but I really can't sleep when I'm told to.

**At my age, I'm pretty poor at restraining myself.** I need to get what I want right away, or I become really upset. For example, if I'm hungry, it's hard for me to wait for food. Hunger hurts terribly all over my body, and I need to eat quickly to make the pain stop. I cry hard because I really need you to help me right away and feed me. When you speak to me from a distance, telling me to wait a moment until my food comes, it's actually an impossible task for me. When I'm hungry and crying, I can't stop crying and understand what you're saying to me. I can hear my mother's voice, I hear her saying my name, "Joel," and I feel the warm stream of her love flowing towards me. But it isn't strong enough to soothe me. When I'm hungry, I need food to calm down. Words aren't enough.

- **My advice: Don't try to teach me anything when I'm hungry. When I'm hungry, feed me quickly; don't try to teach me restraint.**

If you're patient, you'll see that in a few months, by the time I'm about one, you'll be able to demand a bit more discipline in this area. I'll slowly grow stronger and learn how to wait.

The same thing goes for your wanting me not to flail around in my stroller. It won't do any good for you to tell me to stop. If I'm happy, excited, or angry, my body starts to move and it's hard for me to stop it. I can't control my body. My body doesn't listen to me, and to be honest, I wouldn't know what to say to it to calm it down. That's why when you tell me to "settle down," I don't know what to do with your words.

- **My advice: When I flail, don't talk too much. Hug me, or give me something to eat, and my body will calm down by itself. That's how it works at my age.**

**About sleeping at night:** It's hard for me to fall asleep quickly. I don't know why. Maybe it's the darkness that scares me, or the strange sounds at night. Maybe it's hard for me when Mom isn't next to me to soothe me; maybe I'm not tired and my whole body feels alert. At my age, I'm not very good at knowing the reasons for what happens to me. I'm better at feeling what is going on. And I feel that it's difficult and unpleasant for me to go to sleep.

It's important for you to realize that getting angry with me at night doesn't really help. Anger only increases my stress. Talking to me and explaining that I should sleep doesn't help either. As

I said, when I'm stressed and crying I can't focus on understanding what I'm being told; I certainly can't do as I'm told. After all, if I could just go to sleep by myself, I would have been asleep a long time ago, wouldn't I? That makes sense.

- **A few bits of advice to help me get used to sleeping well:**

- **Put me to bed at the same time every day, in the same place.** Don't switch between my bed and yours; that confuses me.

- **When I go to bed, turn down the lights and don't keep hugging me and playing with me, even if I ask you to.** I need to know that now it's time to sleep, not play.

- **If I cry, pat me and use soothing sounds.** Try hard not to take me out of bed, otherwise I get confused again and I may think that it's OK not to sleep.

- **If I keep crying, come into the room to calm me down every few minutes, and then leave.** Don't just let me cry for long periods of time; that feels really awful. But don't give in and feel sorry for me, and don't take me out of bed. Instead, stay near me so I don't feel alone. Leave and come back in again. I'll slowly fall asleep.

**Remember that every time you give in, you teach me to cry harder next time. Every time you don't give in and you stay calm and pleasant, I learn to eventually fall asleep.**

Make an effort for a few days, and you'll see that things get better: It will definitely take me less time to fall asleep, and there'll be less screaming, which will be easier for all of us.

**A final piece of advice: Take discipline at the pace that's right for me.**

I know that there are some babies my age who are already much calmer and more in control than I am. But I can't help not being that way. Every baby is born with his or her own pace. I can't rush to become more organized and more in control, even if you really wish I would. I just don't know how, even if I wanted to.

Imposing disciplinary habits on me that don't fit me is a mistake. It won't work, and it will add a lot of tension and chaos to our relationship. That's no help to anyone.

**Always set your disciplinary demands just slightly above what I'm already able to do. You be patient, I'll make an effort, and we'll be more successful each time.**

Now – good night, I'm really tired and I want to sleep...

**\*Age one to four: Why is everything such a power struggle?**

Three-year-old Shirley's parents complain: "*She fights us over everything. Her answer to anything is 'No!' She makes a scene and screams every time something doesn't suit her. Sometimes we give in just to get some quiet. It's like a constant war with her, with no solution but force. Isn't there some other way? Why won't she stop opposing us?*"

### **An answer from Shirley:**

Sweet Mommy and Daddy! I know I've been driving you crazy recently. To you I've become like a many-headed monster, with every head yelling "No!", crying, or struggling. Yuck! I want you to think I'm adorable and to love me again. I really don't want you to think such bad things about me. That's why I want to explain myself to you.

**At my age, it's important to me to feel independent and strong; that's why I always say "No."** I used to think that I was all-powerful, and that the world worked according to my wishes. For some months now I've understood that I'm not the strongest person in the world, and that there are bigger things than me. That's a scary thought and doesn't feel good. So to feel a little bit less small and weak when facing the world, I try to take control of my surroundings: to make decisions, to do things my own way. That way I feel stronger and more in control, and that feels good.

I'm always trying to test my strength; that's what you adults call a "power struggle." You tell me to stop yelling, and I yell louder; we'll see who's stronger. You tell me to clean up my room and I say no; let's see if you can make me. I want to feel strong!

**You have to understand that I can't grow and be independent only when it's convenient for you.** I know you're proud of my independence when I dress myself, feed myself, and play by myself. You show off my accomplishments to everyone. Your problem starts when I express my independence in ways that don't suit you. When I yell, resist, and struggle, it's inconvenient for you, so you get angry and feel personally insulted. What's the matter – do you want me to be independent only when it's convenient for you? Sorry, it doesn't work that way.

You want me to build my own strong personality. That can't be learned from a book; I'll learn it through my battles with you. You tell me to do something (like go to bed), I think otherwise (I don't want to go to sleep now), so I automatically say no, and I build up my strength through our struggle. I'm practicing being strong.

### **It's good that I'm testing my strength against you, my parents.**

Why? Because I'm closest to you, and you're the people I trust the most. I have confidence that even if we argue and fight, you won't hate me and you won't leave me. I hope I'm not wrong. Sometimes you get so angry with me that I'm not sure anymore. I don't want you to insult me with ugly words, like "You're a bad girl," because your words hurt me, which makes it hard for me to grow and become strong and independent and confident, the way I'm sure you wish me to be.

Besides, when you get angry I feel ashamed, weak, and scared. To feel strong again, I make an even greater show of strength against you, I resist even more, and I say "No." What can come of that? More fighting and more anger. That's not good for any of us. So let's agree that anger is completely superfluous in this process.

**Remember that I'm a normal child, and that these power struggles with you are helping me develop.** I'm not saying you should give in to every "No" or every display of strength and independence on my part. I certainly need you to be stronger than me. I need you to tell me what to do, just not with so much anger.

- **My advice to you:**

**You can insist on your demands, while also being kind and understanding.** There's no contradiction. You could use pleasant sentences such as, "You don't like to be told what to do all the time," or, "You want to decide too." That makes me feel like you understand me. Then, don't give in, insist on what you want, and it'll be easier for me to obey.

For example, if I start screaming in the supermarket because you won't buy me something I want, understand that I'm screaming because I want my favorite candy and you won't buy it for me. You may hope that I'll back down after your sensible explanation, but that's not really possible for a three-year-old. My logic is much weaker than my desire for the candy. So it makes more sense for me to scream. I don't scream on purpose to drive you crazy; I scream because at my age all of my emotions are so intense and loud. Besides, until now when I screamed I usually got my way, so why should I stop? You have to admit my actions make sense.

**You need to restrain yourself and avoid giving in.** Stop being embarrassed by looks from people around you who may be thinking what awful parents you are. Explain to me once that you won't buy the candy, and then don't pay so much attention to my screams. You know that I like to have an audience for my performances; why should I stop screaming? Pay less attention to me, don't give in, and then I will learn that screaming isn't worthwhile, and I will eventually obey.

Let me repeat: I'm a very reasonable child. With three-year-old reason, of course. Understand me, be smart with me, and you'll succeed. That's it for now! I won't answer any more questions... I won't! I won't! I won't!!!

**\*Age four to seven: Why is everything an argument?**

Five-year-old Daniel's parents say: *"Daniel tries to avoid everything by arguing. Mom tells him to brush his teeth before bed; he argues back, saying he'll go when his TV show is over, or his brother should brush first, or he yells that he shouldn't have to brush his teeth at all and that it's not fair to make him do it. We've explained to him quietly that some things need to be done without argument, but it hasn't helped. What can we do?"*

### **An answer from Daniel:**

See, I'm not arguing, I agree with you: I argue over everything. Part of the explanation is the same as Shirley's, my three-year-old friend. I also measure my strength by opposing you. The difference is that I don't just scream "No" like her; I know lots of words and I'm better at arguing like a grownup. So I use them, of course.

**You should understand that I don't like having all the adults tell me what to do all the time.** Do you know how many adults tell me what to do? Let me list them for you. My preschool teacher, the assistant teacher, the music teacher, and the substitute teacher. At home, you tell me what to do, and so do the nanny, the baby-sitter, and sometimes my older brother too. So many people telling me what to do, and I have to consent. I have no right to resist because I'm little. Even when it annoys me. Like brushing my teeth – why do I have to? Right before bedtime, it gets my mouth wet and I don't like the way it feels. In the morning, I like to drink something first, but Mom insists that I have to brush my teeth first. And who has the final say? Mom, of course. She's bigger, so she decides.

**I want to make some of the decisions too. I have wonderful ideas.** You always say you're proud of me for being smart and creative. So why won't you consider my smart opinions? It always happens when I try to convince you that I shouldn't have to brush my teeth, or that you should buy me something I want; that's when you suddenly stop being nice. You start to shout that I'm pestering and annoying you. You say I argue over everything and that you can't take it anymore. What's the matter? Once my arguing gets on your nerves, you don't want me to be smart, with my own opinions? All of a sudden you want me to be obedient and quiet. You think you can have a child made to order – strong and smart when it suits you, obedient and silent when it suits you. It doesn't work that way.

**In fact, you're the ones who taught me to argue about everything.** How? In most cases, when I argue with you, I win in the end. You may yell, but you eventually give in. As a smart kid, what conclusion do you think I draw – to stop arguing, or to continue? Obviously, I decide to continue to argue, preferably while further developing new debating techniques. I have thousands of ideas on how to convince you, and I apply them one at a time: crying, nagging, and especially wearing you out by asking over and over. That always works. Eventually you get tired of it and give in... so why should I stop insisting? I'm a child, aiming towards my own goals, and if a method works for me I use it again and again.

**The problem is that when I lose arguments with you, I feel really hurt and insulted.** Whenever I give in and do as you demand, I feel as though I've failed. Because I'm used to arguing and I need to win to feel smart, I hate losing. These arguments with you exhaust me and hurt me too. I don't always feel like having them, but I don't know any other way.

**I would like you to teach me to do as you ask without feeling as though I've lost.** Otherwise, I'll have to put up with a lot more hurt feelings before I can become a manager in charge of other people, like Daddy, and I can tell them what to do. Unfortunately that will take a very long time;

I'm only five, after all. I don't want that. I have great ideas for you on how to have fewer arguments and fewer hurt feelings.

- **My advice to you:**

**Tell me in a quiet, clear voice that now is the time to act, not argue, and don't back down.** I'll try to argue, but if you don't get caught up in the argument but quietly insist on your position I'll eventually give in. After all, I do as you say in the end. The idea is for you stay calm; don't insult me and don't give in. Be decisive, and this will work. I'll probably make a mad or sad face. That's partly because I hate giving in, as you know, and also partly for show, because I know my long faces weaken you. When I cry or get mad you start to feel sorry for me and soften.

**Remember that I'm allowed to be unhappy with your demands.** It's my right to feel the way I do. If I've done as you asked, that should be enough for you. Discipline my behavior, but leave my emotions alone; you can't tell them how to behave. Besides, when I make an unhappy face, at least something is under my control while I submit to your demands.

**Say a kind word about my effort to obey you even though I didn't want to.** You could say something nice, like, "We know you hate brushing your teeth." That gives me a sense that you understand me, which feels good. It wouldn't hurt to add something like, "It's great that you finally made an effort and brushed your teeth, even though you didn't want to." That makes me feel that at least you appreciate my efforts.

See? It's not that hard. Just know when to pressure me and when to back off. And don't lose your strength or your temper so quickly. Isn't my advice smart? Well then, may I skip brushing my teeth today?...

**\*The elementary school years: How should we use punishments?**

Eight-year-old Kari's parents complain: "*We feel that we have no way to punish Kari when she doesn't do as she's told. We yell and threaten, but we try not to punish. Occasionally we tell her she can't go out with friends or play on the computer. But nothing works. Sometimes Kari smiles and says she doesn't care about our punishments. Other times she bursts into bitter tears that break our hearts. We feel helpless and don't know how we can punish her effectively.*"

**An answer from Kari:**

**You claim you don't punish me, but you do – you punish me all the time with your anger and criticism.** I looked it up, and I found out that punishment is an unpleasant reaction to negative actions, causing the actions to stop. Well, you should know that your reactions to me are unpleasant. It makes me feel really bad to hear you say, "You're a bad girl!" or "You're

driving me up the wall," or worst of all, "Get out of my sight." These are the moments when I burst into bitter tears. Even after the fight is over, I keep hearing the bad things you said in my head, and the bad feeling doesn't go away. I've been told that I'm bad so often, I sort of think of myself that way too. Isn't that a cruel punishment, for me to think such terrible things about myself? Believe me, the cost of that punishment is heavy, and the benefit isn't clear at all.

**You say that punishment is meant to teach me to obey the rules.** You lecture at me over and over, telling me that someone who can't adjust to the rules can live in the jungle, but not in civilized society. You claim that you're teaching me an important life lesson. But you're wrong – because there's nothing good to be learned from shouts and insults, and because your punishments don't get me to change my behavior, so you haven't taught me successfully.

**To tell the truth, I think you punish me because you don't know what else to do with me.** You get furious and frustrated when I don't obey you, so you lash out in anger and react with yelling and with senseless, hurtful punishments. I make you mad, so you pay me back with a punishment that hurts. During those moments of rage, there's no logic to your actions – admit it!

Do you want an example? Last week I acted up at the table, or maybe I hit my stupid brother, I don't remember exactly what started it. You reacted with your usual punishment: "Go to your room and don't come out until you've thought about what you did." Great punishment! Do you seriously expect me to think logically about my mistakes, and draw clear conclusions about how to improve my ways? Come on... It makes much more sense for me to think, "It's so unfair that they're mad at me. It wasn't my fault." Chances are that I will continue the fight and want to get back at you. That's why I laugh and say that I don't care. I know it annoys you and I do it on purpose.

**I'm sure you'll agree that sending an angry, upset child to "think" is an illogical and ineffective punishment.** You've sent me away to think as a punishment so often that it makes me believe I hate thinking. Thinking is always bad, and associated with fights and punishments. In the future, I'll try to avoid thinking about my actions as much as possible, even when I really should. And that's too bad. If you want to teach me to obey rules and fit into society, there are other ways besides hurting me uselessly.

- **My advice to you:**

**Aside from the punishments, try talking with me quietly.** Listen to me, and try to find out why I disobey you. I'm certainly not opposing you at random – I have a reason and it would be better for you to know what it is. I'm not saying I'm easy to understand, but it will save us a lot of unnecessary arguments. Trust me, and believe that I can be talked with reasonably before jumping straight to punishment. Sometimes I have sensible suggestions, and you ignore me. For example, I offered to organize my backpack after watching all of my TV shows, and you insisted I do it before. Why do you always think I'm wrong? Why can't you ever compromise? It would spare us so many fights and punishments.

**If there must be punishments, I prefer them to make sense and really teach me something.** How about telling me in advance what price I'll pay if I don't do as you say? Think about the price ahead of time, so that it makes sense. For example, you could tell me that I have to finish my homework by eight o'clock in the evening, or I can't watch TV.

**Explain to me that I have to choose** whether to finish my homework and then enjoy TV, or not finish and miss my favorite TV shows. I like to choose, and I trust myself to make the right choice. It might not go smoothly at first, because I need to learn how to make choices, and I need to believe that you mean it this time. I think I'll learn though. Why not? I'm a good student at school.

It reminds me of a soccer game. There are rules, and if a player breaks them, the referee pulls out a colored card. The player pays a price for his mistake; nobody gets angry with him. It's so simple. That can work well with me too. Use a system where I pay a price for my mistakes that is a natural consequence of my actions. I haven't finished my homework yet, so I can't watch TV. I haven't cleaned my room, so I have to stay in it until I'm done. This system will work very well if you apply it calmly, without anger. I'm willing to pay the price of a punishment – as long as there's no damage to your love for me.

**Finally, I suggest that you use a lot of compliments.** Aside from punishments, you should frequently say kind words to me when I've done well. A nice comment about my good behavior has a far greater impact on me than shouts and threats. After all, I don't disobey you all of the time; lots of times I behave well, and you seem to forget that. You tend to focus on the negative, but it's more important for me to hear you say clearly how pleased you are with me. Even if it seems like there's no reason to praise me for things I should be doing anyway, like listening to you. Believe me, one kind word is worth a thousand punishments. Kind words also create a positive atmosphere at home, instead of the anger and punishments that ruin it. I would love for us not to fight all day, wouldn't you?

Do me a favor and be strong and reasonable. Be authoritative; be parents. That way I can be an eight-year-old and enjoy life.

### **\*Adolescence: What else can we say to her?**

Fourteen-year-old Rachel's parents say: *"Until this year we had no trouble with her. She's a good student and a quiet kid. Recently she's been coming home late, and she won't let us say anything to her, because according to her that's what everyone does. She dresses too provocatively for our taste and claims it's her right, and never mind her messy room, we can't even mention that to her. She thinks everything is her decision and we have no right to tell her what to do. Now she wants to get her eyebrow pierced. We absolutely refuse, but she's pressuring us because everyone else is allowed. Do we have the right to tell her what to do, or is it perhaps her right to decide on her own?"*



### **An answer from Rachel:**

I think I'm very well-behaved for a fourteen-year-old. But you go too far – you demand discipline as though I were a little girl.

I sometimes have the feeling that you fell asleep when I was about ten, and now you've woken up and discovered that you have a fourteen-year-old girl who isn't the same as she used to be. Your sweet daughter, who used to do everything she was told, is suddenly causing trouble. You're surprised and angry with the new Rachel all over again every time. But I haven't done anything wrong; I've just grown up and changed, and you haven't. You have to change, or you'll be left behind – yelling, complaining, but with no effect on me.

**You can't dictate things to me the way you did when I was little.** At my age, there are a lot of areas that used to be under your authority and aren't any more. For example, my clothes – I have my own taste and it's none of your business. Sorry to inform you, but my room isn't under your jurisdiction anymore either. My room is my fortress, my private place, the only place in the whole world where I can make my own messes without being told what to do. Do you think I would give all of that up so easily, just because you want to see my room clean? I'll keep my mess out of the living room or kitchen, those are your territories. But I'll decide about my room. How's that for a compromise?

**It's not worth getting into head-on collisions with me.** You can use threats to force me to clean up my room or not dress a certain way. You may win for a while, but it won't last. At my age, as soon as I hear a condescending or commanding tone, I automatically resist, even when it's against my best interests. You tell me not to leave the house – I go out. What will you do to me? Kick me out? I know you won't, so I take the risk and do as I please. At worst you'll get a little upset. I'm used to that and I don't really care. Believe me, fighting teenagers directly is unwise. I admit, I even enjoy my struggles with you, because they allow me to feel powerful, which I like very much.

**Don't give up on discipline and boundaries.** At my confused age, I very much need you to guide and protect me. Even when I scream the opposite – don't take it too seriously. I'm only asking you to achieve discipline in ways that are appropriate to my age.

- **My advice:**

**Use brains, not brawn, to deal with me.**

**Let go of some of your demands.** Be flexible! For example, cleaning up my room. As long as it's nothing really extreme, don't get involved. You can settle for my putting my dirty clothes in the laundry hamper and my dirty dishes in the sink. Ignore the papers and the rest of my mess. It's comfortable and organized to me. An adult wouldn't understand.

**Negotiate some of your demands.** When it comes to curfew, tell me your opinion but listen to mine. I want to be like my friends; it doesn't make sense for everyone else to come home at 2

AM, and for only me to have to be back by midnight like Cinderella. If we talk to each other calmly, we can find a compromise between my suggested time and yours.

**Stick to some of your demands.** Choose your battles! For example, the piercing – I know that's your decision. That's why I scream so loudly, to confuse you so that you might give in. It's okay for you to say that I'm too young to make that decision on my own, and you have the final say. Explain your position to me with calm logic. Be sympathetic to my disappointment. Chances are I'll obey you. I'll sound like an offended victim, but in the end it'll be clear to me that it's your right to decide on something as dramatic as permanently marking my body.

It's also okay if you decide to let me go ahead with the piercing. That would be great; I'd feel like I beat you in a struggle and I'd be overwhelmed with excitement. At first I'll be thrilled with the novelty, but I'm likely enough to take the ring out a few weeks later. It's happened to a lot of my friends and the same may happen to me.

**How will you know when to let go, negotiate, or stand firm? Talk to each other, listen to me, take a look around, ask for advice if necessary, and you'll figure it out.**

That's it, I have to run meet my friends. We're going to the mall. I don't know when I'll be back. Definitely not by ten, like you told me to last time. Forget it! Bye!