

## "No" Know-How

Help your kids accept their limits

By Sandy Mayle

I hate to say "no" to my kids. I don't like to be the unpleasant voice of reason, and I dread the prospect of battle.

I don't think I'm alone. Our reasons may vary, but few parents enjoy opposing their kids or denying their desires. I once heard a well-known radio Bible teacher say in an address opposing legalism and oppressive rules, "In fact, my wife and I determined that we were never going to tell our daughters 'no' unless it was absolutely necessary." It sounded like a good plan, but when I mentally applied it to our family, it didn't provide much relief. There were a lot of times when it seemed absolutely necessary.

I used to think that we'd have to do our toughest parenting when our three boys were young. But now that they're teens, we've had to draw the line on a whole new host of issues?media, dating, friends, curfews, to name a few.

A pastor friend recently told me that music became such a hotly contended issue in his home, it finally led to a full-blown family discussion. As opinions were expressed and guidelines were established, he says, "There were anger and tears."

As difficult as it can be to say "no" to my sons, I know that it's often the biblical way to parent them. Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." The "later on" is why my husband and I don't consider "no" to be an entirely negative pronouncement.

### Listen First, Deny Later

Many years ago, I was talking to a friend outside of church when my toddler son suddenly began trotting toward the street.

"Jamie!" I called sharply. Immediately, he changed course. Our pastor witnessed my son's response and said, "Kids need to learn to obey right away like that, because in a life-or-death situation, there's no time to explain."

When my sons were toddlers, "no" was short, firm, non-negotiable. It was easily enforced, and, as my pastor noted, only the most basic explanation or justification was necessary. But as our sons have grown older, the way we say "no" has changed. It's seldom in the hard-nosed way I did that Sunday with Jamie.

I'm certainly tempted to respond that way much more often than I do. But when one son brings me a Christian review of the latest secular movie and asks, "Mom, will you read

this and see if I can go?" or another says, "Mom, I want to ask you something, and I don't want you to say anything until I'm all the way through this," I try to choke back the too-ready answer on my lips. Their requests usually aren't unreasonable, so I need to hear them out so that my "no" if that's my answer comes, not out of irritation or selfishness or stubborn close-mindedness, but out of a real desire to protect my sons and guide them to make sound decisions.

#### Be Flexible But Firm

My youngest son drools over cable TV. "If we had cable, I could watch all the NASCAR races, not just the ones on the major channels," he laments. But the cable hookup lies disconnected because, at least in our area, that hookup would also include programs that are far less desirable.

"Can I get on Instant Messenger later tonight? Nobody's on this early," another son used to plead. But we've had enough problems with questionable material on the Internet that my husband and I became convinced of the need for time restrictions.

We've found that we need to shift gears on these issues periodically. At one time we used a filtering software to keep unsuitable material off our computer, but now we use a program that records and rates Internet activity for regular third-party (in this case, parental) review. We feel comfortable giving our boys a little more responsibility for what they do on the computer with the understanding that we will be checking up on them now and then. The same is true for our rules on dating and curfew: We are firm, with a promise to be flexible as they get older and show us they can be trusted with more responsibility.

Do my kids protest the constraints? Sometimes. But turning them loose on the Web or TV is the equivalent of waving at little Jamie as he toddles toward the busy street, "Be careful, honey. I'll be done talking soon."

Someday they will be loose in all the traffic of modern life. We want them to know how to protect themselves, and how to protect those they love, even when it's not appreciated.

#### Know to Whom You're Accountable

"Mom, it's PG-13. I'm 14. Kids laugh at me because I'm not allowed to go." In my son's mind, the ratings, filters, and other media "guidelines" are perfectly trustworthy. But after one or two rentals of PG-13 movies, it became painfully obvious to me that the industry's rating system couldn't be relied upon as our ultimate authority on acceptable content. What our culture deems acceptable for a 13-year-old is very different from what we want our young teenager to view. In truth, even other Christian families have widely varying standards in this area.

After a long period of conflict, it was a watershed moment when, much like that pastor's family, we ended up sitting around in the master bedroom discussing the various negative elements of movies and establishing where and why the lines would be drawn.

That was well over a year ago. I recently came across our written guidelines in a dresser drawer and reread them. We've been holding pretty close. Those guidelines haven't solved everything, but they've kept us from rehashing many of the same issues.

Sometimes circumstances pressure us to soften our stance. Sometimes our sons' arguments threaten to wear away at our resolve. But the apostle Paul wrote, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2). We must not let the world do our thinking and parenting for us.

It hasn't happened often, but I have been challenged to the point where I finally say, "No, just no. It would be a lot easier to say 'yes,' but it's really not up to me. I'm going to have to answer to God someday for my decisions, and I don't feel it's what he wants."

God's Word says, "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). I want my kids to learn that godly restrictions aren't based on parental opinions or preferences. They're derived from the Holy Spirit's application of God's Word to our children's lives as best we understand it. They're birthed out of prayer and meditation and listening to God's voice.

On my dresser lies a worn index card, a reminder of a conflict-ridden season in our family. When I was overwhelmed by regular confrontations with angry, strong-willed children, these verses gave me tremendous comfort:

"Do not be dismayed and break down at the sight of their faces, lest I confound you before them and permit you to be overcome. . . I have made you this day a fortified city and an iron pillar and bronze walls . . . and they shall fight against you, but they shall not [finally] prevail, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1: 17-19 AMP).

It's been said that parents who love each other give their children a sense of security and a wholesome pattern for the future. Certainly that's true. But an awareness that parents are acting under the ultimate authority of a loving, protective God really completes the picture.

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