



When kids make mistakes, the last thing they need to hear is, "I told you so."

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# Win-win discipline

BY DIANA TONNESSEN

**My** 5-year-old son, Vijay, was all set to impress his friend Danielle one afternoon by pouring her a glass of milk all by himself. But the gallon jug was too heavy for him to handle, and he accidentally spilled milk all over the table and onto the floor.

"You spilled it!" Danielle squealed, with a look of utter disapproval on her face.

As tears welled up in Vijay's eyes, I could see that he was embarrassed. And although I had repeatedly told him to ask for help when he wanted a drink—this was his third "accident" in less

Danielle a glass of milk. And I could tell you were really upset when you spilled it. But you know that when the milk jug is full, it's hard to pour and you need a grown-up to help you. What can we do next time so you don't spill the milk and get all embarrassed?"

than a week—I managed to bite my tongue. He certainly didn't need me to tell him he'd messed up; besides, I didn't want to put the lid on his independence—just on his spills. So instead of the usual "How many times do I have to tell you" routine, I took a new approach.

"Here you go," I said calmly, handing him a sponge. Without a word, he cleaned up the spill and went off to play with Danielle. Later, after Danielle had gone home, I said, "Vijay, it was very nice of you to try to pour

Vijay thought for a second and then said brightly, "I know. . . we could pour it together." He paused before adding, "But I'm going to do most of it myself!"

Had I lost my cool and scolded him for not listening or put him on the spot in front of his friend, I probably would have prompted an angry outburst. Instead, by making myself his ally and not his adversary, I sparked a solution. Such win-win discipline borrows from the East Asian tradition of "saving face"—allowing

people to get out of sticky situations gracefully—without judgment or confrontation. This approach, by definition, is an antidote to power struggles. After all, if there's no winner and loser, there's less reason to fight.

Power struggles that push a child into submission lead to the three R's: revenge, rebellion, or retreat, according to Jane Nelsen, Ed.D., author of the *Positive Discipline* series of books. The child loses face, and the parent loses influence. "Lectures, threats, and punishment create distance and hostility," she says. "Face-saving discipline creates closeness and trust."

The key to saving face is giving your child options—and responsibility—for his

Gootman, Ed.D., an education professor at the University of Georgia, in Athens, and author of *The Loving Parents' Guide to Discipline* (Berkley). "They're away from home, developing new skills, relating more with their peers." A public comeuppance will only anger and alienate them, possibly leading to more misbehavior.

Giving your child more power in the discipline process doesn't mean relinquishing your own. As the parent, you are still responsible for setting limits and teaching appropriate behaviors. And inevitably, you will have to instruct or correct your child in front of others, whether it is friends, family, or strangers in public places.

## solutions let your child save face.

behavior and allowing him his dignity. "Even very young children can feel humiliated when stripped of their power," says Rebecca Kantor, Ed.D., associate professor of family relations and human development at Ohio State University, in Columbus.

Allowing your child to save face, especially in front of his peers, becomes even more important as he gets older. "Once children start going to school, they become much more self-conscious," says Marilyn E.

Here, then, are some tips for turning "I win, you lose" battles into win-win victories—for both of you.

**Give them a choice . . . and a way out of trouble.** Even a frustrated toddler can appreciate options, according to Kantor. Let's say you're at the toy store with your 2-year-old, who doesn't want to leave. You might say, "It is time to go now. Would you like to walk out of the store by yourself or have Mommy carry you out?" You may still end up having to carry her out of the store



# Face-saving ways to say it

kicking and screaming, but eventually she'll realize that she does have a choice, and then she will feel less humiliated and more in control.

Letting my 9-year-old son, Casey, make some choices about his piano practice increased his time at the keyboard and decreased our time arguing about it. I offered simple options over how and when he would practice (whether he would was not up for discussion): "When would you like to practice the piano? In the morning, after school, or after dinner? Would you rather practice 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening, or 20 minutes all at once?"

Says Kantor, "Giving limited choices sends a message to your child right from the start that he chooses to behave in certain ways, that he is responsible for his actions, and that his actions have consequences."

**Let the consequence fit the crime.** Once you've given your child a choice of behaviors, you must accept his decision. He, in turn, must accept the consequences of his actions. Just make sure

that they are not harmful and that they are a natural outcome of the behavior, advises Nelsen.

For example, if your 3-year-old refuses to choose from the two breakfast selections you've offered, the logical consequence is that he goes without breakfast. Tell him matter-of-factly, "I'm afraid you're going to get hungry before it's time to eat again." Then accept his decision and move on. It won't hurt him to go without food for an hour or two. If he complains of being hungry, say, "You can have some fruit for your snack, but I'm not preparing another meal until lunchtime."

Even a time-out can be presented as a natural consequence. Gillian Nassau, of Gainesville, Florida, tells her whining 5- and 6-year-olds, "If you must carry on like that, you'll have to do it in your room, because nobody else wants to listen to it. When you're ready to be social again, you can come out."

As quickly as you can say, "I told you so," you've set the stage for a no-win situation for both you and your child. Sometimes just softening your tone of voice or choosing your words a little more carefully can turn a potentially humiliating diatribe into a face-saving dialogue.

Instead of saying	Try saying
Now look what you've done!	What happened here?
Don't you dare!	Your behavior is unacceptable.
How many times do I have to tell you?	Remember, we've discussed this before.
If I ever catch you doing that again ...	How do we make sure this never happens again?

It's important for kids to understand the real-world consequences of their actions too. If your 5-year-old throws a tantrum at a friend's house, wait until you get home and tell him, "If you don't share with your friends, they won't want to play with you."

**Be discreet.** The best way to help your child save face in public is to discipline in private. "There's nothing more humiliating to a child, especially once he is school-age, than being singled out and yelled at or punished in front of others," says Gootman.

Sometimes, however, your child will do something in public that demands immediate action. There are ways to halt his behavior without humiliating him over it. Say, for example, you're visiting at a neighbor's house and your 4-year-old begins jumping on the playroom couch. The first thing to do, according to Gootman, is to calmly tell your child to stop, and matter-of-factly explain why: "You need to get down off the couch

before it breaks or you get hurt." If she persists, gently but firmly pick her up and put her down on the floor. If she puts up a fuss or resumes jumping on the couch, cut short your visit and take her home immediately.

**Offer an incentive.** Different than a bribe, a face-saving incentive lets your child walk away from an encounter having gained, rather than lost, something. It can be a tangible reward ("Once your room is clean, we'll be ready for dessert") or a psychic

one ("As soon as you calm down, you can join us at the table"). Either way, you show your child that his efforts are valued. "Adults don't go to work every day for nothing," says Irwin Hyman, Ed.D., professor of school psychology at Temple University, in Philadelphia. Likewise, he adds, children need to see their hard work pay off.

Praise is one of the greatest incentives. "Whenever I see that my kids are about to do something bad, I immediately start to praise them for the opposite behavior," says Marci Levi, of Reston, Virginia, mother of Andre, 6, and Danielle, 7. "If my son isn't sharing, I say, 'Andre, I really liked the way you shared your toys with your sister yesterday.' He usually catches himself before things get out of control."

**Show you care.** Nelsen suggests starting off any disciplinary talk with a statement of genuine concern: "I love you, and I'm concerned that what you're doing could get you into trouble." Perhaps nothing ensures a win-win outcome more than a declaration of your love. □

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The best solutions come when you're an ally, not an adversary.

