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Saying "No" & Meaning It

What Part of "No" Don't You Understand?

My country-western station is reliable. I can count on it to depress me. Maybe it's only in contrast to that bleak backdrop that one song always makes me smile - my favorite line: "What part of no don't you understand?" Its context is a woman who's frustrated in her attempt to discourage a male pursuer. Its relevancy to front page news can't be overlooked.

It also reminds me of the difficulties we seem to have saying no to our children and our students. I should re-phrase that. We don't have trouble saying no; we have trouble following through on it. How often, as parents, do we say no, confident that we mean no, only to find ourselves brow-beaten and harassed into backing down. Puffed up from previous victories, our adolescents are skilled at pouting, crying "no fair," accusing us of playing favorites and never having enough time for others and promising outrageously wonderful future behavior. Their attacks are straight forward and relentless. We are no match for their flair for outrage, injustice and hurt. We back down. We shorten the time they're grounded or let them talk on the phone just this evening or whatever. We convince ourselves that we had been too severe, had over-reacted and that it's admirable that we can admit we were wrong.

As our children get older, the no's get more complicated and our teenager get more adept at challenging our positions. The part of no they might rightly not understand may be the inherent contradiction in our position. "No, you should not sleep with your boyfriend" is harder to understand when juxtaposed with a prescription for birth control pills. What do we mean when we say, "No you shouldn't drink, but if you're going to drink, bring your friends and drink here at our house"? What do we mean when we say, "bigotry and racism are inexcusable," and then we laugh at racial slurs or discourage our children from visiting friends who don't live "near us"? What do we mean when we tell our son to get a haircut and then do nothing and make the school enforce its rule? What do our children think when we say no they can't take the car, use the credit card, make long distance calls, watch hours of television, talk on the phone all night, or whatever and then do nothing about enforcing that rule? What part of no don't they understand? They don't understand which part we mean and which part we don't mean.

[Teachers and administrators] are able to keep a little more distance, a little more objectivity. Fortunately [an] angry eighth grade student has limited access to [teachers and administrators, those] who ruined her life. Pouting, the silent treatment and similar tactics are less effective when confined to five 40 minute periods.

Still, . . . teachers and administrators, . . . don't have an easy time saying no and sticking to it. In a society that seems preoccupied with building self esteem, allowing children and adults to do and say what they want, just plain no seems to smack of an authoritarian, inflexible and perhaps politically incorrect position. "No, you may not wear that to school," could sound non-inclusive. "No, you cannot write articles in the school paper about . . . ," sounds like censorship.

"No, you can't lie, cheat or steal," goes down better. It can also get complicated when we try to ferret out who lied and about what. Gone are the days when the school called and said, "Come and pick up Suzi." She cheated and is suspended for three days." Mr. and Mrs. Suzi dutifully came and took Suzi home. Now [teachers and administrators are] lucky if Mr. and Mrs. Suzi don't arrive with a lawyer in tow or at least with references to how they "might have to call him," with demands for an appeal process and a review of all the testimony. If [the school] is fortunate enough to bypass this potential for disaster, there's a fair chance that Suzi will spend her three suspended days unsupervised, watching soaps and soaking up the rays. When she returns bronzed and beautiful, many kids may not understand what no means.

In the less dramatic version, Harry's math teacher's comment includes a reference to Harry's failure to turn in his homework. The message: "No, Harry, you must do your homework every night." Mr. and Mrs. Harry, who both work for JHU Aero-Space Institute, come blasting in, asserting that Harry doesn't do his homework because he is not sufficiently challenged. They, the charming couple, have heard that many parents are unhappy with this teacher. There has even been some talk about switching schools.

Let's assume the school is able to hang tough. "No, Mr. and Mrs. Harry, we're not switching teachers." "No, Harry, we disagree with your parents." I like the sound of it, but I wonder if Harry doesn't hear a slightly different melody.

So, what part of no don't you understand? It might be the part you thought we didn't mean. Or at least the part where we weren't willing or able to follow through. Perhaps my [radio] station will be relieved to hear that now I can no longer break their mood and smile when I hear this song.

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