What to say before you tell your toddler no

"My two-year-old wants another cookie right before dinner. If I just say "No," she collapses. What do I say before the no?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"No. I said no. Stop asking."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You really want another cookie. They're yummy. Cookies are finished for today. Apple, or wait for dinner?"

A bare "No" arrives before your child knows you understood what she wanted. At two, that can feel like the want itself was refused, not just the cookie.

What emotion coaching is

Researchers led by John Gottman described a way some parents respond to their children's feelings and called it emotion coaching. The parent notices the child's emotion, sees it as a chance to connect or teach, helps the child put a word to it, accepts the feeling as real, and then helps with the problem. Accepting the feeling is not the same as granting the request.

In a trial in Australia, 216 parents of four- and five-year-olds were randomly assigned to a six-session emotion-coaching course or a waitlist. Afterwards, parents in the course used more emotion words and talked more about what causes feelings, and their children knew more about emotions. The children were a little older than this page's band, and the study tested a course, not a single sentence.

The American Academy of Pediatrics adds the other half: calm, firm limits, kept consistently, with choices among options you can accept.

What the words do

Take 2 does three things in a few seconds. "You really want another cookie" names the want. "They're yummy" agrees with her, which costs nothing. "Cookies are finished for today" is the limit, said once, without a lecture. The small choice at the end gives her something to do with the disappointment. If she cries, you can stay close and kind; the cookies stay finished.

If you live in two homes

The rules about snacks may differ between homes. You don't have to match them, and you don't need to explain the other home's rules. "In this house, cookies are finished for today" is enough. Naming the want works the same way in both homes.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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