What to say before you tell your six-year-old it's time to go

"My six-year-old begs to stay at the park and I snap "No, we're going, now." Then the whole walk home is a fight. What do I say first?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"No, we're going. Now. I'm not discussing it."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You wish we could stay all day. I get it. It's time to go now, and you can tell me the best bit on the way."

"No, we're going, now" is a fair decision said at the wrong moment: before your son knows you noticed he was happy. The fight on the walk home is often about that, not the park.

What emotion coaching is

John Gottman and colleagues described emotion coaching as a set of parent habits: noticing the child's feeling, seeing it as a moment to connect, helping the child name it, accepting it as real, and then helping with the problem. The feeling is accepted; the behaviour still has limits.

The approach has been tested as a parenting course. In an Australian trial of 216 parents of four- and five-year-olds, parents randomly assigned to the course used more emotion words and talked more with their children about causes of feelings, and their children knew more about emotions afterwards. The study tested a six-session course, not one sentence at a park gate.

The American Academy of Pediatrics describes the firm half: explain the rules in words your child can understand, keep them consistent and follow through calmly.

What the words do

"You wish we could stay all day" names the want in his words. "I get it" costs you nothing and shows you heard. "It's time to go now" is the limit, once, with no reasons he can argue with. The last part gives him something to do on the way, which is easier than being told to stop being upset. If he is still cross, let him be cross and walking.

If you live in two homes

Leaving is harder when the next stop is a handover to the other home. Name that too, if it's true: "You're sad the park is over, and it's a switching day. That's a lot." Keep the time of the handover between the adults.

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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