What to say before you tell your eleven-year-old no

"My eleven-year-old wants to go to a sleepover at a house I don't know. When I say no she says I never listen. What do I say before the no?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"No. End of discussion. I don't have to explain myself."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You really want to be there. Everyone's going and you don't want to miss out. I can't say yes to a house I don't know yet. Could she come here instead?"

At eleven, "I don't have to explain myself" lands as proof of exactly what she just said: that you don't listen. The no is reasonable; the order is the problem.

What the research describes

John Gottman and colleagues described a style they called emotion coaching: the parent notices the feeling, treats it as a chance to connect, helps name it, accepts it, and then helps with the problem. In that order, a limit comes after the child knows she was understood, not instead of it.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' policy on discipline sets out the other side. Its authors concluded that harsh methods, including yelling at or shaming children, are minimally effective in the short term and not effective in the long term, and it guides parents towards positive, teaching-based discipline instead. Its guidance for parents adds that rules should be explained in terms the child understands, and that attention and warmth stay central into the teenage years.

What the words do

Take 2 says back what she wants ("you don't want to miss out") before anything else. Then the limit, with the real reason in one line: you don't know the house yet. The last sentence offers the yes you can give, so the conversation can move to planning instead of fighting. You don't need her to agree that the no is fair. You need her to know you heard her before you said it.

If you live in two homes

If the other home would have said yes, don't make it a contest. "Your dad and I might decide this differently. In this house, I need to know the family first." Don't ask your child to carry the question to the other parent.

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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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.