What to say when your six-year-old pushes a rule

"My six-year-old refuses to wear his bike helmet and yells "You're mean! Everyone else's mum lets them!" I either cave or bark. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Because I said so. One more word and there's no bike at all."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You really don't like the helmet. I get it. Helmet on, or the bike stays here."

Caving and barking feel like opposites, but they come from the same place: believing you have to choose between being kind and being in charge.

What the research says

In the 1960s, Diana Baumrind observed preschool children and their parents and described three patterns: authoritarian (strict and cold), permissive (warm but undemanding) and authoritative (warm, with clear expectations and reasons). The authoritative pattern, firm and warm at once, is the one later research keeps returning to.

A 2017 meta-analysis pooled 1,435 studies of children and adolescents. Parental warmth, behavioural control (clear rules and follow-through), autonomy granting and an authoritative style were each linked with fewer behaviour problems, though the links were very small to small. Harsh control, psychological control (guilt, shaming, withdrawing love), and authoritarian, permissive and neglectful styles were linked with more, and harsh and psychological control most strongly. These are associations across many families, not proof about one bike ride.

The American Academy of Pediatrics puts it practically: calm, firm consequences, rules explained in words your child understands, and plenty of attention for what goes right.

What the words do

"You really don't like the helmet. I get it" is the warmth. "Helmet on, or the bike stays here" is the limit, with a consequence you can actually keep. There is no threat to take away the bike forever, and no lecture about "everyone else's mum." If he chooses no bike today, that is the rule working, not you losing.

If you live in two homes

Two homes often hold rules differently, and a child will sometimes use that: "Dad lets me." You don't have to win the comparison or criticise the other home. "That may be how it works at Dad's. In this house, the rule is the rule, and I'll tell you why." If a rule matters for safety, try to agree it with the other parent directly, not through your child.

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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6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
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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.