emoGlow · Scripts

When it's time to leave and your child protests · Ages 5–7

What to say when your six-year-old won't leave a friend's house

"At pick-up my six-year-old begs for "just five more minutes," then melts down in front of the other parent when I say no. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Fine, ten more minutes. But then we really, really have to go."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"We're leaving when this game ends. Do you want to say bye to Sam now, or at the door?"

At six, leaving a friend's house is a negotiation he has practised. The instinct, especially with another parent watching, is to give a little more time to keep the peace. The research on transitions is about younger children, but its pattern holds a lesson.

What is known, and at what age

A study in an early childhood setting compared a two-minute warning with letting toddlers carry a toy through a change of activity. Neither strategy worked on its own. Compliance improved only when the adults also followed through, so that protest no longer kept the activity going. A study of two preschoolers whose tantrums came at transitions found the same: advance notice did not help, and consistent follow-through did. These are small studies of children younger than six, so they describe a pattern, not a finding about his age.

The NHS says that giving in will not help in the long term: changing your mind to stop a tantrum teaches a child that tantrums work.

What the words do

Take 1 rewards the begging with time, and sets up a bigger plea in ten minutes. Take 2 ties the leaving to a moment he can see, the end of the game, which is easier to accept than a number on a clock. Then it hands him a real choice inside the leaving: when to say goodbye. No study we know of has tested the choice itself; it is everyday practice that gives him something to do besides protest.

When the game ends, go, even if he is upset. Name the feeling once ("You didn't want it to end"), thank the other parent, and save the talking for the car.

If you live in two homes

Leaving can be hardest at a changeover, when "time to go" also means going to the other home. Keep the same words and the same follow-through, and keep your own feelings about the changeover out of the leaving. Pediatricians' guidance on separation says to let a child spend time with the other parent without feeling guilty.

In the UK

The NHS temper tantrums page says giving in will not help in the long term, and that changing your mind teaches a child that tantrums work. If you are seriously concerned about your child's behaviour, talk to your health visitor or GP. 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 (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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5. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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8. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
9. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

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.