What to say when your six-year-old refuses to tidy up

"I ask my six-year-old to tidy his toys and he says "No! You do it!" Then I threaten to throw them all away. What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Tidy up now or I'm throwing it all in the bin."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"The toys go away before dinner. Cars first or blocks first? Your call."

"Tidy up or it all goes in the bin" sounds firm, but most parents won't actually bin the toys, and a six-year-old soon learns which threats are real. The fight becomes about who blinks first.

What the research says

A meta-analysis of 41 studies found that being given a choice was linked with more intrinsic motivation and effort, and that the effect was larger for children than for adults. Small choices about how to do something, and two to four of them in a row, were among the stronger findings. These were mostly experiments with tasks, not bedrooms full of cars, so treat this as a direction.

Writing from self-determination theory, researchers describe autonomy-supportive parenting as taking the child's perspective, offering choices within clear structure and explaining the reasons for rules. The choice works because the structure is there.

The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the same advice for young children: choices among acceptable options, sensible limits, and calm follow-through.

What the words do

"The toys go away before dinner" sets the limit and the time, without a threat attached. "Cars first or blocks first?" is a genuine choice, and either answer gets the job started. "Your call" makes the decision his. If he says "No!" again, you don't need to escalate; you can say "Okay, I'll start with cars. Your turn with the blocks," and begin. The job stays the job.

If you live in two homes

Routines may differ between homes, and the choices you offer can too. What helps is that the limit in your home is clear and the choice is real. If your child says "At Mum's I don't have to," you can answer calmly: "That's how it works there. Here, it happens. You choose how."

In the UK

In the UK, "bin" is the everyday word for the trash. 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.