What to say when your toddler whines for everything

"My three-year-old says everything in a whine: "I want juuuuice." By teatime I'll give her anything to make it stop. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Stop whining! Fine, fine, here's your juice. Just stop."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I can't understand the whiny voice. Can you ask me in your regular voice?" Then: "Thank you for asking like that. Here you go."

Whining wears parents down faster than almost anything, and there is a reason. The instinct, by late afternoon, is to give in to make it stop. That is the one response that teaches the whine to come back.

What is known, and at what age

Researchers who studied whining describe it as familiar, and irritating, to parents of preschool and early school-age children. In their study, adults found whining more annoying than other kinds of speech, such as demands or angry statements. Whining shares its sound with the sing-song voice adults use with babies: higher pitch, slower words and exaggerated rises and falls. It is built to be hard to tune out.

The CDC's guidance for parents of toddlers says that withdrawing your attention is usually most effective for minor behaviours like whining, that the behaviour may get worse when you first start, and that when it stops you should return your attention and praise right away. It also says not to ignore a child who is hungry, tired or sick, or one who is hurting someone.

A study that followed 731 families from when children were two found that coercive back-and-forth between caregivers and children went with more and more noncompliance from the children (not doing what they were asked) over the next years. Giving in after a long whine is one everyday form of that back-and-forth.

What the words do

Take 1 scolds the whine and then rewards it, so the lesson is that whining works if it lasts long enough. Take 2 tells her, once, which voice you can answer, and then answers that voice quickly and warmly. Say it the same way every time. Expect more whining for a few days before less: that is the pattern the CDC describes.

If you live in two homes

Whining often spikes around changeovers, when a child is tired and in between homes. Expect it, keep the same calm request for the ordinary voice, and don't read it as a sign of how things are at the other home. If you share anything with the other parent, share it directly, not through your child.

In the UK

If whining comes with your child often seeming unwell, tired or in pain, talk to your health visitor (for under-fives) 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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4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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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.