What to say when your six-year-old whines about everything

"My six-year-old whines about everything: shoes, the car seat, the walk to school. I snap or I give in. What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Will you STOP whining? You're driving me mad. Fine, I'll carry your bag."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You don't want to walk today. Tell me in your normal voice and I'll listen."

By six, whining has often become a habit with a history: it has worked before. The instinct is to snap at it or to give in, and on a tired day to do both. What the research describes is a quieter shift: make the ordinary voice the one that gets you.

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. Adults in their study found whining more annoying than other speech, such as demands or angry statements, and its sound is close to the sing-song voice adults use with babies. It is hard to tune out by design.

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 following years, through to the start of school. Snapping and then giving in is one everyday version of that loop.

The CDC's guidance says that withdrawing your attention is usually most effective for minor behaviours like whining, to expect the behaviour to get worse at first, and to return your attention and praise as soon as it stops. It does not apply to a child who is hungry, tired or sick.

What the words do

Take 1 tells him he is driving you mad and then carries the bag, so the whine has worked twice. Take 2 names what he wants in plain words ("you don't want to walk"), which shows you heard, and invites him to say it in his ordinary voice. When he does, listen properly and answer kindly, even when the answer is still no. Make the ordinary voice worth using.

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, or with dread about school, talk to your GP or your child's teacher. 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.