



**Christmas is a tough time for parents.  
Negotiate with kids to behave? We are all doing it, and they  
are very good.**

All I want for Christmas is a bit of peace. But, as the father of 2 children, I suspect I have about as much chance of this as snow falling on the Post Office Tower! Christmas is a great time and I don't want to get all Humbug but boy do you need your wits about you as the holiday season approaches. Kids and Christmas, like budgets and cuts, go together and this year like no other in my memory I need to manage the purse strings as my little ones are beginning their relentless negotiation pressure.

Mumsnet, a new website aimed at giving parents advice and a forum to discuss bringing up children, recently ran an online survey which asked their users what techniques they used to get their under 5's to do as they are told. 85% said they used bribery (or negotiation) as the most appropriate way of keeping their kids in line, more than those who used the more traditional parenting technique of just saying no.

Frighteningly, 75% of those parents who said no, then caved in under pressure and gave in. 51% did so because they were short of time and 46% because they just couldn't stand the noise.

Is it because as parents we have just lost the knack of how to negotiate or is it that kids are just brilliant at it?

Parents today are raising the best generation of negotiators the world has ever known. Beginning at about age two, kids negotiate everything from what to eat to what to wear.

As they get older, they negotiate when and where to do homework and what activities to get involved in. During the teen years, negotiations open up over time to get in after the party and who gets use of the car.

But what do they do that makes them so much better than us, and what can we learn about how to handle negotiations in the big bad world by watching our children.

1) The first is to get creative. Kids do not worry if the items they are trading do not appear to be connected. A colleague of mine tells the story of his son Tom, who every Sunday would be badgered to

finish his sprouts at the lunch table. This would happen every week and usually ended in tears (of frustration by the parents).

In early December Tom was asking his dad if he could get a Play Station for Christmas and was meeting a little resistance. Immediately Tom made a proposal, "Dad if you get me a Play Station for Christmas, I promise I will eat my sprouts every week".

What did a Play Station have to do with sprouts? Absolutely nothing, except that Tom had recognised that eating sprouts was important to his parents and had banked it. Crucially, because it appeared important, he knew he could get something worthwhile in return.

Being creative is hard on the hoof, so make sure when you are preparing to negotiate you spend time brainstorming all of the variables you have to trade. Spend particular time trying to come up with concessions that have a differential value, worth a lot to the other side, but cost you little to give in.

2) Make sure you are consistent. If you change your mind like the wind when put under pressure, do not be surprised if the pressure mounts every time a disagreement looms. "Play nicely while I make this call and you can have a biscuit" "I want 2 biscuits". "Okay 2 biscuits then"

Next time you want a 5 minute break guess where the negotiation opens. At 2 biscuits! What is worse is that you have set the precedent that when you are pushed concessions will pop out.

And work with the others in your team to ensure consistency is maintained. The number of mums who complain that whilst they put the child on the naughty step, the dads invite them off to watch telly. You need to present a consistent and strong message. If you do move from your position, and you will sometimes have to do so, get something back in return. Remember negotiation is a trading process, not a way of surrendering slowly.

3) Asking for what they want. Kids are very clear about what they want and are not afraid of asking for it. See the length and specificity of the list for Santa. Somehow we seem to lose this directness as we get older and seem afraid of having being rejected. When you are negotiating get used to the other side saying no and actually welcome it. It shows that you are pushing hard for the deal. Experience suggests that kids do not seem to see no as the end of the negotiating process more like the beginning.

This is where creativity comes back into the mix. The more variables you have to play with the more you can sweeten the deal with concessions, if needed to protect the bigger picture.

4) Watch out for hollow threats. They destroy all your credibility. A friend of mine told his son that if he didn't stop running up and down the corridor he would throw him out of the window. After the look of utter fear disappeared from the boy's face he started running again. He had called his father's bluff and in so doing had made his dad feel like a total fool. Unrealistic or barking mad threats and proposals will not solve a conflict. At best, they will create an argument. Many parents freely admit to making threats that they know that they cannot stick to.

Threats and sanctions are powerful ways of building your power in the negotiating arena. Use them, but use them sparingly and only when you are prepared to follow them through. Draw an empty gun and it will only backfire.

5) Ask lots of questions. Why? Why? Why? Anyone with a 3 year old will tell you that once that question has been learned it is used with much and irritating frequency. Kids want to understand and they are driven by the desire to soak up as much as they can from the world around them. Why can't I have a pony for Christmas? Why, why, why? They are not worried about looking foolish by asking simple questions over and over again. Act like an idiot but think intelligently is good general advice.

Good negotiators do a lot of the stuff that comes naturally to our kids. Avoid the lying on the floor tantrums, but use some of the ideas above to get better at creating good deals.

Good luck this Christmas, if it all goes bad you can get 8 to 1 on a white Christmas, you might need the money!

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