

Time to Go: If You Say It – Do It

from a parent's perspective

by Roslyn Duffy

– Situation –

“Angela, if you throw that ball one more time – we’re leaving!”

“Benjamin James, what did I say? If you can’t share the sandbox toys, we’re going home!”

“Micah, I warned you we’d have to leave if you took that toy away from your sister. If this is the way you behave, we aren’t coming back to Auntie Cathy’s again!”

What problems do you experience?

Send a description, a short word “snapshot” of the situation. Each issue, we will address your real-life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear.

Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.

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– Solution –

So leave already!

Do those statements sound a bit too familiar? Children everywhere hear such messages all the time: then little Angela will toss her ball — again; while little Benjamin James will continue to stockpile the sandbox shovels and wily Micah will snatch first a rattle, then a spinning top, and next a cuddly bunny out of his baby sister, Lucy’s, tiny fingers. Their parent’s messages and the children’s behavior will continue — but nothing changes. No one stops. And no one goes.

Say it — do it

Doing what we say is called *follow-through* and most of us aren’t very good at it. The reason that what we *say* and what we *do* often fail to match is because most of us suffer from the ‘Too Much’ syndrome. This syndrome comes in three recognizable forms. We Ask ‘Too Much’, Say ‘Too Much’, or Say We Will Do ‘Too Much’ (more than we are willing to really do).

Ask ‘too much’

When we tell a young child that there will be dire consequences if he or she does something “one more time,” we have spelled out almost certain disaster. Why? Impulse control.

Young children don’t have much impulse control or are working on acquiring it. Throwing that ball *one more time* is almost a reflex action. A better plan would be to

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say what to do with the ball: “Keep the ball on the floor. Please roll it along the ground.”

If that fails to work — ask the child how she needs to play with the ball when inside. This method gets the child engaged in the problem and makes it easier for her to comply.

If the problem continues, act. Take the ball away. Assure her she will have a chance to try to use it in an acceptable way later that day (or the next day, or whatever seems reasonable).

If after you have done these things and problems continue, it is time to leave. You said it. Now do it. *So go.*

Saying ‘too much’

Does Benjamin’s mom really believe he doesn’t know what she said? His mom has become very practiced at repeating things, and Benjamin knows that she will keep saying ‘it’ (whatever ‘it’ was this time) until her voice reaches shriek level, at which point he might respond. Mom’s flow of words has long ago become background noise to Benjamin, because mom *says* a lot more than she *does*. Follow-through is rare. The words flow — but actions don’t.

Say less — and mean more

Try asking a child what she thinks it is that you are going to say, in this case, about sharing the sandbox toys. Most likely, he will thrust a shovel in his playmate’s direction while muttering, “I can’t have them all.” Or, “I have to share.” (Big sigh).

Let the child have a chance to say something — which will make his ‘doing’ that something far more probable.

They do KNOW! Try asking.

Here is a good self-check. Try to say what it is you want from a child in ten words (or less).

Example: “It is time to leave. It is really cold today, so you need to get your coat on and then we will go outside” (24 words). Replace the above with: “Coat,” (1 word). Maybe add, “Cold,” (2 words). He will know what you mean. Now go!

Saying more than you will do

This final category of ‘*too much*’ includes the ‘*grounded for life*’; “Get down from that tree or I’m coming up to get you”; and the “This is the last movie I am ever taking you to” category of comments. These all inclusive statements are so over the top, even we hear how silly they sound as they slide out of our mouths — like overgrown chewing gum bubbles popping and splattering all over our faces.

That ‘*we’re not coming back*’ threat is one that Micah and his Auntie have probably heard more times than either of them can count. Of course Micah will be coming back to his Auntie’s. Isn’t this where the family will gather for Passover or Hari Raya or Christmas?

When we say things like the above, we become less credible. And what about Auntie Cathy? Isn’t this threatened banishment of her favorite nephew punishing her as well?

The moral here is:

If you say it — be prepared to do it. Therefore, be careful of what you say.

Leaving — or not?

If it is time to leave — be prepared to do so. Make leaving real — not a dangling threat. And remember — leaving as punishment may be punishing others besides the child. Try to deal with misbehavior in other ways, such as going into

another room to help a child calm down or reviewing expected behaviors once more. If the misbehavior continues, then leave, while reassuring everyone that you are confident there will be another, more successful opportunity to behave better on the next visit.

Save announcements about leaving for the few minutes before stepping out the door.

‘Time to go’ needs to be linked to (newsflash!) — going.

One of my daughters once told me that when I said “time to go,” she knew she had at least a half hour to play, because I would take forever saying good bye. You know what — she was right. I had to work at getting my own good-byes said, before I made that final leaving announcement. Then, when I said it — we left.

Follow-through works

If we want our children to hop up and leave when we say it is time to do so, then we need to be prepared — to go. This is true of leave-taking, or anything else we say.

If we ‘Say It’, We need to ‘Do It’.

That is follow-through — and follow-through works. Therefore —

Beware of what you say



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together for years. Roger was a founder of NACCRRA and served on its governing board for its first eight years. We have continued the relationship with NACCRRA participating as an Exchange Strategic Partner. We applaud NACCRRA for its invaluable work as the hub of the child care system — connecting parents, providers, and policy makers.