

My daughter is the queen of the whine. She, even more so than her brothers, is the quickest to let me know when she disapproves of some aspect of my parenting. She can shove her bottom lip out, throw her arms across her chest, and stare holes into me like she is training for the gold medal in pout and whine. There is no greater test of my ability to be consistent in my parenting than in my response to her whining.

Toddlers lack the skills to communicate or bargain for them appropriately, so they do it in the only way they know how: **with whining**. Whining, begging, and pouting are normal in a child's development. Language is a newfound power for a young child, and she easily learns what kind of communication gets what she wants the quickest way possible.

Take an example of a typical candy struggle. Your child has been told "No candy." She decides to test your limits with a weak and pitiful attempt at complaining. At this point, she is fully aware that she doesn't deserve the candy and shouldn't get the candy, but she is willing to try anyway. You tell her "no" again. She already assumed you were going to say no, but is not ready to give up without a fight. Her protest increases in pitch and volume. She hopes that this tactic of using a high-pitched nasally voice will grate on your nerves enough to make you want to stop the whining by giving in. Unfortunately, giving in now will only make your child whine quicker and more often in the future. If you give in even once, especially in public, you will have reinforced the behavior and it will appear again and again.

### Another Idea

Whining could be your child's cry for *your undivided attention*, their *need for reassurance*, or for some *quiet time or a nap*.

Sometimes after a long day of school, my children show me how tired they are. This is the time in our household when they tend to become the whiniest. I can often snap them out of their behavior by using a bit of humor. When they make their normal whining sound after being told no, I respond with, "Did a cat just come into the room?" I then ask them to help me find the kitty cat who is making that awful whining noise. I then "meow" a few times in the same tone they whined in.

My kids think it's silly, but they have learned that I am giving them a chance to change the way they are talking to me without me getting frustrated with them. While we have never found that cat, we have come out of many situations with less frustration for both my children and me.

### What to Do

Recognize why your child whines. If your child starts her question with a whine, it is usually a clue that she doesn't know how you are going to respond. At this point, you can gently redirect her with a reminder that you don't respond to whining. If the whining is mild and diminishing in degree, you can ignore the whining because you have already warned her that your ears don't respond to whining.

If your child's whining becomes increasingly annoying, she has probably learned that whining is effective for getting what she wants. Do not reward whining. Resolve to say "no" if your child whines, even if you would have normally said "yes." Forcing their will is a behavior that your child will eventually learn is inappropriate. We teach this by **being consistent** and **using age-appropriate discipline**.

Do not let your child know that the whining is getting on your nerves. If she continues to whine, set a minute timer and let her know that you expect her to start talking nicely when the timer goes off. Sometimes children will react to the uselessness of the whining with anger or not give up whining after the minute timer is over. Give fitting consequences to the behavior without giving in. **Your no means no.** You may have to reinforce your decision with a little time-out if your tot resorts to whining when he doesn't get what he wants.

Whining is a learned behavior, but it can be unlearned, too. Be consistent. Respond to the whining using the same approach every time. Your child will eventually learn that whining is not a useful tool in getting what they want. Rewarding good communication and behavior when it happens helps to **reinforce** the good behavior you would like from your child.

## Preventing Whines

Sometimes being aware of your child's surroundings can help to prevent whining before it starts. The American Academy of Pediatrics has a few suggestions to help.

- **Look for the Problem.** Consider hunger, thirst, uncomfortable clothes, shoes, or positions, and especially fatigue as a physical cause of whining. Illness, such as an ear infection, fever, stomach ache, or cold and flu, also affects a child's ability to control their emotions.
- **Limit Frustration.** Provide age-appropriate time schedules and activities. Be sensitive to whether you're pushing your child beyond her emotional and physical limits. Whining can escalate in situations where children feel they have no control or power.
- **Be Vigilant.** Be aware of new situations or stress that your child might be feeling. Also take notice of a time of day or activity that seems to trigger whininess. Plan for regular, scheduled special time with your child to help her feel special, important, and that she belongs.
- **Offer Encouragement.** Encourage your child to use words and help them learn acceptable ways to ask for something or to protest something that they don't like.

*While it is frustrating in the moment, understand that your child is doing the best they can to tell you something's wrong, that they want something, or that they want something to go their way.*

### Resources:

1. Healthy communication with your child. American Academy of Pediatrics. <http://patiented.solutions.aap.org/handout.aspx?gbosid=156475>. Accessed July 17, 2019.
2. Shelov SP, et al. Behavior. In: Caring for Your Baby and Young Child: Birth to Age 5. 6th ed. New York, N.Y.: Bantam Books; 2014.
3. Discipline and your child. American Academy of Pediatrics. <http://patiented.solutions.aap.org/handout.aspx?gbosid=156436>. Accessed July 17, 2019.