

Get Kids to Stop Whining

By Marilyn Suttle

Whining has a way of bringing out the worst in parents. What do you do when your child starts to whine? Do the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end? Do your shoulders tense? Are you overcome with feelings of frustration or worry? If their whining has you whining, “I just can’t take it anymore,” then it’s time to explore new ways to deal with whining behavior.

Are your kids occasional or full time whiners? Occasional whining happens when kids get overwhelmed by discomfort. Too tired, too hungry, physically ill, or emotionally spent, they seem to disintegrate before your eyes. If your children whine occasionally, a short break, some food, or rest can freshen up a child’s mood and save your sanity.

Four-year-old, Jane spent hours running errands with mom. She was over-tired and started whining, “I hate shop-ping. I wanna get out-ta here.” Seeing her daughter’s distress, Mom recognized that a break was in order. Mom said, “It looks like you could use a lunch break.” After a quick bite and a little rest, Jane’s mood lightened and they finished their errands.

Sometimes children whine because it’s the only way to get our attention. Mom is showing her friend some family pictures. Andy asks in a polite tone, “Mama, can I see the picture?” Mom ignores his request. Andy reaches for the picture and in his nicest voice says, “Can I see, please?” Mom brushes his hand away and continues talking with her friend. Upset, Andy whines, “Mom-me, let me seeee.” Mom says, “Oh, all right!” Andy learns that Mom doesn’t respond to polite requests. Whining is the way to get her attention. Whining could be avoided if Mom responds to Andy’s acceptable way of speaking. Mom could say, “I like the way you asked to see the picture.” Then, she could either show him a picture or redirect him to another activity.

Whining is hard enough to deal within the privacy of our own homes, but when we are out in public. Yikes! What do you do when everybody is watching? To avoid embarrassment, we sometimes reinforce the behaviors we want to stop.

There is a reason why grocery stores put candy down low at the check out counters. By the time you get in line, your child is cranky. You’re tired. The candy looks good, and the whining begins. “Ple-e-e-ese, get me a candy bar,” your child whines. With a store full of people watching, you put aside your good judgment and stop the whining by giving in. Your child learns, that whining can turn a “no” into a “yes.”

In order to stop excessive whining, we need to change the way we respond to it. Ineffective ways of dealing with whining include: yelling, showing pity, giving in, criticizing, and mimicking a child’s whiney voice. These responses lower a child’s self esteem, increase hostility in your relationship, and reinforce the whining behavior. If a child hears himself called a “whiney little baby” long enough, he’ll start believing it. He may come to see himself as a weak person in need of pity, or a master manipulator who can con people into his service.

When you have a problem, you need a plan. Here is a whining action plan to help replace the habit of whining with more helpful ways of communicating.

1. Develop a new attitude toward whining. Instead of seeing your child as annoying or bad, see your child as a person who needs to learn a new way to behave. Replace anger and anxiety with the belief that your new responses will make a difference. This attitude will help you from slipping back into old ways of handling the whining.

2. Talk to the kids. Explain how whining makes you feel and what you are going to do from now on. Discuss acceptable ways they can express themselves the next time they feel like whining. Keep the meeting friendly. Don't bring up problems from the past. Talk about solutions for the future.

One Dad told his kids, "Whining is no longer an acceptable way to get what you want. The sound of whining bothers me and prevents me from paying attention to what you are saying. So, I've decided not to respond to whining anymore. You can choose to whine or not to whine. That's your decision. The only way you'll have a shot at getting my attention, is to talk in a speaking voice." He made sure to let his kids know that their feelings matter to him. He said, "I understand that when you're whining, you're feeling unhappy, and I care about your feelings. I also have faith in your ability to handle frustration and use acceptable ways of expressing it. Without whining, you can tell me, 'I'm upset,' 'I don't want to go to bed,' or 'I want a cookie.'"

Together, practice the sounds of a whining voice and a speaking voice. It's surprising to see how good it feels to whine. Try it yourself. Say the following sentence in a whiney voice: "I don't wan-na get the kids ready for bed." By involving the kids and playing with different ways of speaking, their awareness grows and so does their cooperation.

3. Ask your kids to explain the new action plan to you. This way you'll know that they understand what you expect of them, and what they can expect from you.

4. When the kids whine again, and they will whine again, put your plan into action. You can say, "Peter, I hear whining. I'll be happy to talk with you when your voice is as calm as mine." Say your words with compassion instead of anger. Getting angry reinforces the power of whining. It's normal for kids to test your resolve. Expect the whining. It's part of the learning process. Put your attention on other things while they whine. Then, give your full attention to your child when the whining stops.

One Mom commented, "My daughter used to whine all the time. She would whine, and I would come to her aid. When I talked to her about the whining action plan, she was shocked. 'Mommy,' she said, 'How will you ever know when I really want something?' Our conversation was a real eye opener for me.

Don't expect instant success. Kids learn from experiences. It may take time for them to realize that the payoff for whining is gone. By keeping a positive focus your kids will begin to see the benefits of using acceptable ways of expressing themselves.

Marilyn Suttle shows you how to create happier family and work relationships. She is a dynamic speaker, author and columnist. Subscribe to her FREE monthly e-newsletter: Life in Balance: Thriving Kids/Thriving Parents, by visiting her web site: WWW.SuttleOnline.NET. © 2005 Suttle Enterprises LLC.