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Saying “NO”: an essential tool for child education

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Parents' education task towards their children is complex, long and wide as childhood itself and even beyond. It comprises many different topics. In every stage there are new, different challenges to be faced:

- To teach what is healthy and what is dangerous.
- To show what must be done and what must not be done.
- What and how to eat.
- Hygiene, assurance, duties, responsibilities, respect towards other people ...

In the first three years, giving explanations is not very useful. Although they can be given, these must be simple and concise sentences. In that stage, parents usually say the word NO. Is it useful, necessary or right?

It is necessary in order to establish the limits between what is allowed and what cannot and must not be done. Hence, a baby who begins to move must be stopped immediately with a **NO!** (loud and clear) if he moves towards a ladder or to the edge of a swimming pool or if he wants to touch the oven door. This is, if he is in danger.

Accordingly, this NO is an Essentials tool for SECURITY.

However, the word NO **can “wear out” if it is used too much.**

- When it seems that everything is forbidden and it is at the beginning of all sentences. *“Don’t do that, don’t climb there, don’t touch that...”* The child becomes insensitive to the word NO since, generally speaking, it is impossible to avoid that he does so many things; many of them are likely to be unimportant.
- When you try to change many things at the same time. It is impossible to reach too many goals at the same time. It is like throwing some darts together to the dartboard. It is better to pick one at a time and point well. And, in each childhood stage, some objectives need to be set. It is better to keep NO for really serious matters: aggressions and those which can be a risk for a child's health.
- NO can also be “deactivated” and **it doesn’t work either** when it is not linked to a **real limit**. For example, if a child is jumping on the sofa and keeps on doing it after telling him to stop twice. No much effort must be made. Picking him up, sitting him in the sofa and leaving him next to his toys is enough when the same message is repeated for the third time. Loud and clear: *“you must not jump on the sofa”*. There is no need to wait for “the hundredth time”, when a scream is used and a discussion is held (which will not be very useful at this age).
- When it is an **inconsistency**, for example, if the baby is hit gently and *“you must not hit anyone”* is said.

Another situation in which NO loses its value is when you smile when you say it. This often occurs. Those “mad short people” are funny and their tricks, such as sweet faces when they are going to touch something that we have just forbidden. It depends on the risk of course. The best thing to do (again) is to take them far from that place and from temptation and make them forget to touch the TV buttons (or whatever it is).

And, if the aspect is important, it means a risk, keep your position clear and not to laugh at all.

When children grow up, these challenges will change and parents must adapt to them and change the strategy.

Firmness can be sometimes confused with authoritarianism. Parents who impose a long list of forbidden actions do not educate better. We must recall that, if they are excessive, they will probably be **impossible to be kept**.

It is not a matter of “imposing” our own criterion or firm rules. Some rules must change with time (timetables, duties, responsibilities...). Only the ones which have to do with the child safety and with the respect towards other people must be really firm.

Also, a child progressive maturity demands to develop **negotiation** skills. It is better to take some time to plan the best strategy to solve each of the situations with them. A quick NO is usually regretted although it is the quickest solution for a question when parents are busy. It is better to say *“wait until I finish this and we will talk about it”* or *“I need to think about it”*. With our cool head, the question could be analysed, the child desires understood, the aspects analysed and we could negotiate permission or limits.

What is really demanding is to keep firm. And when NO is said and what is forbidden is not avoided, the rule is not followed and there are no consequences for breaking it, educational failure, chaos, insecurity and arguments will begin.

Remember:

- The word NO is useful to set limits. It is a security barrier to protect children from dangers.
- Mother or father authority must be supported by few rules, which must be firm and consistent.

- NO must mean “*You canNOT do that*”. But there must be few forbidden things.
- It is useless to say NO many times if it is not linked to a real limit.
- A NO which goes together with a smile means YES.
- Before answering to a question with a NO, it must be analysed. A better answer is “*I have to think about it*” or “*we will talk about that as soon as I finish this*”.