

Helping Your Child Tolerate “No”

If every “no” leads to a meltdown, it can start to feel like the answer is to just say “yes” more often. But tolerating “no” is a skill that can actually be built, the same deliberate way you’d teach any other skill, a little at a time, in low-stakes moments, before it’s needed in the hard ones.

“You can’t build tolerance for “no” by avoiding it. You build it by practicing with the small ones.”

HOW TO BUILD IT

- 1 **Practice saying “no” to small, low-stakes requests on purpose.** When the stakes are genuinely low for everyone.
- 2 **Pair the “no” with something else when you can.** “No more TV right now, but you can pick a book.” The boundary stays; something is still offered.
- 3 **Acknowledge the disappointment briefly, then move on.** “I know, that’s a bummer.”
- 4 **Notice and praise any moment they handle a “no” reasonably well.** Even a small one.

WHEN IT DOESN'T GO SMOOTHLY

- ☐ Stay with the boundary calmly rather than re-negotiating in the moment.
- ☐ Once they’re calm, name what they could try instead next time, deep breath, ask why, ask for something else.
- ☐ Note which specific “no’s” are hardest (screen time is common) and give those extra practice on easier days.

TRY THIS

“No” to something minor, said calmly, followed by a brief acknowledgment and an immediate pivot: “No more crackers right now. Want to help me set the table?”

BUILDING TOLERANCE OVER TIME

Increase the stakes gradually, start with the easiest “no’s,” work up to the harder ones over weeks, not days.

Keep the response consistent across caregivers, so the boundary doesn’t depend on who’s asking.

Celebrate flexibility when you see it out loud, especially the first several times.

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