

Dealing with Stubbornness

Tip – Choose to see stubbornness as it really is: persistence in training. Help your child learn to govern and control this valuable trait by setting reasonable limits and then enforcing them.

Some children seem unusually stubborn. When you say, “No cookie” before dinner, this child bargains and negotiates for half a cookie – or begs for “just a crumb.” When you say, “Don’t climb the fence,” he waits until you’re not looking and then tries again. This child will try to push past, or around, you to meet his own goals.

The most useful approach: stop calling the child stubborn and look at him as persistent. Parent

educators Helen Neville and Diane Clark Johnson point out that persistence is an enormously useful adult trait. “These children keep working for what they want in spite of difficulties,” they write in their book, *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child’s Inborn Traits*. They tend to work at projects until they are done. When there are differences of opinion, they negotiate until they find a solution.

Tools – Neville and Johnson do realize, however, that persistence can create challenges at home (and elsewhere). They advise setting reasonable rules and limits for this child and then sticking to them, consistently and firmly.

Limit-setting isn’t always easy. If it doesn’t come naturally to you, realize that rules and rituals make life more predictable for children, and that increases their sense of security and safety. One parent educator compared living in a home without limits to the same feeling adults would have speeding over a high bridge at 60 miles per hour – with no guard rails.



Some common household rules are:

- Use a respectful voice.
- Touch others gently.
- Clean up after yourself.
- No discretionary time until homework/chores are done.

The rules in your home will naturally suggest themselves after repeat problems. For example, if your persistent child argues endlessly when you set a limit on her behavior, you may develop the rule: If a child argues with a parent’s decision for more than 30 seconds, she must go to her room for 30 minutes.

Neville and Johnson recommend reviewing rules in advance. If you have a rule about no treats at the grocery store, remind the child of the rule before you enter the store. They also suggest offering two yeses and then a consequence. For example, for a child who is splashing water out of the tub, you could say, “You can splash water in the tub or pour it with this container. If you splash water outside the tub, your bath is over.” In this example, the child is given two acceptable options for playing with water. He knows that if he breaks the rule he will lose playtime in the bath.

Finally, rules and limits are only as good as your follow-through. If a child breaks a rule and you don’t enforce a consequence, your child learns that your rules don’t matter and it is okay to ignore you. Further, the calmer you can be, the more effective your discipline will be. If you lose your temper, the child will be distracted by your emotions instead of focusing on his own behavior and how to improve it.



You’ll find more practical tips you can use right now in *Temperament Tools: Working with Your Child’s Inborn Traits* by Helen F. Neville, B.S., R.N. and Diane Clark Johnson, CFLE.