

be a better parent



Help your child behave (without nagging)

Surprise: You really *can* get her to quit hitting, name-calling, tattling, and more—and it's easier than you think. Details below. *by Ellen Welty*

So your 4-year-old isn't smoking cigars, and your 10-year-old isn't losing the family fortune at the roulette table. Nonetheless, at a tender age, your child may have developed some undesirable habits, from tattling to (ahem) "colorful" language. As you probably know, nagging your little darling to stop rarely works. So we asked parenting experts for their no-fail advice on how to help your child break a bad habit.

BAD HABIT #1: Hitting

● **During a play date at your house, your 3-year-old and his pal reach for a dump truck at the same time. You wince, knowing what's coming: Your son bops the other kid to get what he wants.**

Console the pal by saying, "Ouch! I know that hurts. I'm sorry Johnny forgot the rules about sharing toys." Say it within earshot of your child; this helps him realize that he hurt someone else, says Gail Reichlin, a national parenting

educator and coauthor of *The Pocket Parent*, and remorse helps motivate us to change bad behavior. Then take your son aside and tell him, "I know it's hard to share, but hitting is not OK."

Later, engage your son in some role-playing. Have him choose two stuffed animals to be "Good Choice" and "Bad Choice," says Reichlin, and let him do the "talking" for each. Ask Bad Choice, "Today, when you wanted a dump truck at the same time as Jordan, what did you do?" You may be surprised to hear your kid say, in a deep voice, "I was mean. I hit him on the arm to get it." Then ask Good Choice, "What do *you* do when you and a friend want a dump truck at the same time?" He may say, "I ask, 'Can I have a turn?'" If your son doesn't come up with all this himself, help him by offering suggestions. Repeat this role-playing after each incident, and your son will soon quit the hitting habit.

BAD HABIT #2: Tattling

● **It's preschool pickup time, and you're chatting with Conor's mom when your 4-year-old zooms over to tell her, "Conor got in trouble today for pushing kids." It's not the first time she's tattled on her friends.**

Since even negative attention is attention to a kid (which only exacerbates the habit), try not to react when your star of *Law and Order: The Preschool Unit* trots up with her latest juicy bulletin. Instead, let Conor's mom respond. (You can mouth, "Sorry!" to let her know that you disapprove of the tattling.)

Later, says Reichlin, tell your daughter you're glad she knows the rules about shoving. Then say, "I notice you like to tell moms when their kids do something inappropriate at school. That's called 'tattling,' honey. It's when you tell a grown-up what someone did just to get them in trouble." Explain that her friends won't like it if she tattles on them, and that even grown-ups don't want to hear it. Let her know,

however, that you still want her to tell you or another adult when a person is in danger, is hurt, or really needs help.

And what about those gray-area incidents she'll report—for example, when a friend teases her? Ideally, she should learn to handle those situations herself. But sometimes the little kid's just too tired. So commiserate with her, saying, "Teasing makes me sad (or angry) too." Letting her know you understand how she feels provides a big dose of positive attention.

BAD HABIT #3: Sore-loser fits

● During a game of backyard baseball, when you tag your 7-year-old out, he kicks the base and stomps off, wailing, "That wasn't fair! You cheat!" Unfortunately, he reacts that way when anyone beats him at anything—even Go Fish. Wait a few minutes before trying to talk sense with your competitive guy. Then say, "I know it's frustrating—I don't like to lose either. But maybe you'll win next time." Deliver gentle variations of that speech whenever he has a meltdown, says Elizabeth Pantley, author of *Perfect Parenting*.

If he pitches a fit when a friend beats him at driveway basketball, call your son inside and privately help him calm down (so embarrassment isn't added to his current set of problems). "If he can't rein in his emotions," says Pantley, "distract the kids with a new activity."

Also, look for ways in which you may contribute to his bad habit. Don't consistently let him win at any game to try to help him gain confidence. And don't high-five him only after soccer games in which he scored—high-five him just for playing.

BAD HABIT #4: Using nasty language

● Your 5-year-old has a friend over. When the pal's mom comes to pick her up, your little sweetie says, "We're still playing. Go away, you big fat idiot." You always wanted a highly verbal child, but this wasn't exactly what you had in mind. Your mortified impulse: to order her to apologize—this instant! But, says Steven A. Maybell, Ph.D., co-author of *Raising Respectful Kids in a Rude World*, her words would be insincere. And scolding your daughter

may make her more likely to talk that way again. Instead, say to her, "Actually, the play date is over," and apologize to the mom on the way out.

That same day, says Maybell, tell your child, "I felt embarrassed when you called Kyle's mom a 'big fat idiot.' Think of how she must have felt." (You can also let her know you understand how disappointed she was when the play date ended.) If the behavior persists, tell her that, because she has continued to speak that way to her friends and their parents, she'll have no play dates for a week.

What if your little cutie spouts four-letter words? Because kids tend to repeat them if they get a big reaction, simply say, "When you use that word, it hurts people's feelings," advises Maybell. If she uses that language in front of you, tell her: "Because I respect myself, I don't want to be spoken to that way. I'll continue our conversation when you can talk to me more respectfully." This will considerably reduce the words' attraction. After all, if your language leaves you with no one to talk to, why would you use it?

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