



# Parenting Tips

## SEEING THINGS FROM A YOUNG CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW

Parents spend a lot of time and effort trying to get children to go along with their agenda--getting to work on time, going to bed, eating vegetables, etc. When kids don't comply, parents try "discipline" that sometimes includes threats, promises, and even punishment. All too often, parents and children lock horns in anger and frustration. A philosophy and technique called positive discipline or child guidance can help reduce the frequency of power struggles between parents and young children.

For child guidance to work parents must first recognize that children think and act very differently than we do--they aren't just little people who think like adults. When you meet resistance from your little one, consider what the child is doing and why--from her point of view.

Suppose you are trying to get your toddler out of the house on time to meet the rest of the family for an outing like Judith in the following scenario.

Judith is in the kitchen getting together some snacks and other things to take to her older children, while two-year old Miriam plays nearby with her stuffed animals and baby dolls.

*Judith:* "Come on Mimi. It's time to meet Seth and Elena."

*Miriam:* "No."

*Judith:* "It's time to meet Seth and Elena ... and Daddy."

*Miriam:* "No, doggies."

*Judith:* "You want to get a doggie to take to the car?"

*Miriam:* "No, two doggies."

Miriam goes to her room to find the perfect dog to take. Five minutes pass and Judith is afraid that her other children are getting hot and tired waiting in the sun. She suggests a couple of options to Miriam without luck. Eventually Miriam joins Judith in the kitchen clutching two stuffed dogs. As they walk to the car, Miriam stops abruptly and kisses each dog in turn, pausing to look at Mom in between each kiss. Finally, she gets in the car.

From the adult's perspective this extensive decision-making and pausing for kisses, looks like a plain and simple case of obstruction. The adult is trying to get going; the child is resisting. But if you look at the encounter from the child's point of view, a very different picture emerges.

In getting ready to leave, Judith was considering many different details and trying to move forward. Miriam was thinking **only in the present**, about the play she was engaged in right then.

Young children are very **egocentric**; they can't comprehend someone else's perspective, making transitions are particularly difficult for them. Initiating an activity and engaging in it are developmental tasks central to early childhood. Judith wasn't aware Miriam had **initiated** an activity **autonomously** with her dolls and animals. Her negativity about not going was not so much defiance, as it was difficulty in stopping an important and meaningful task.

Miriam's decision to take the stuffed dogs along (and to take care in choosing just the right ones) stems from another developmental need of young children: **security**. It's the classic Linus and his blanket, a fundamental need deserving of respect.

As to kissing the doggies, this is evidence of yet another primary activity of young children: using **pretend** play to give meaning to experience. When mothers get ready to go someplace they gather up their children, often giving them a kiss. Miriam was acting out what a 'good mother' does in how tightly she held the dogs and how carefully she kissed them, pausing for Mom to see and appreciate

how she was acting. In doing so she was also using pretend as a bridge to help her get through a difficult transition.

So when young children seem resistant to your requests, observe what the child is doing to see if her behavior stems from any of the themes central to lives at that age: **egocentric**, **only-in-the-present** thinking, **initiative**, **autonomy**, **security**, and **pretend**.

Much can be learned about who children are and why they do what they do by starting with empathy and understanding. From there you're more likely to develop a strategy that will lead to cooperation instead of more opposition.

When a child's safety is involved, however, direct commands are in order. Regardless of how the child may see the situation, your judgment comes first. "Stop right there, cars are coming," is an appropriate response when a child wanders too close to a busy street. Then pick him up and explain why he must behave according to your instructions, "When you get close to the street it scares Mommy. Cars are coming and you could get hurt."

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County

423 Griffing Avenue, Suite 100

Riverhead, NY 11901

Phone: (631) 727-7850 Fax: (631) 727-7130

[www.cce.cornell.edu/suffolk](http://www.cce.cornell.edu/suffolk)

