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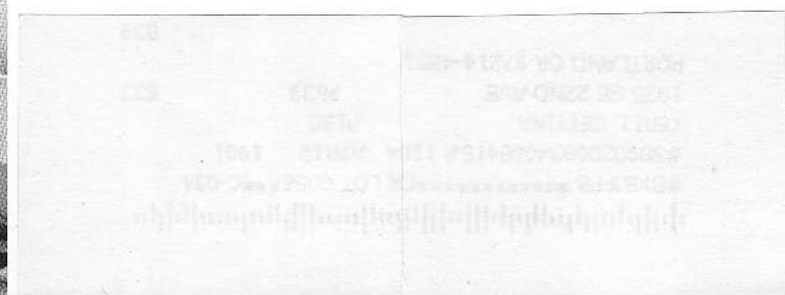
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# How to Win Over Stubborn Kids

All it takes is a little reverse psychology to get an obstinate child to see things your way.

BY TERI CETTINA ILLUSTRATIONS BY SUZANNE SALES

The battles with the older of my two girls began when she was a toddler and have morphed into hassles over homework, computer time, chores—you name it. Some kids just seem to be built to butt heads with their parents. Call it stubborn or strong-willed: If you've got one, you know the usual discipline methods don't work. These kids want to be in charge, but so do you!

**I**nstead of resorting to verbal combat (aka yelling or pleading), try my so-called "sneaky" or "judo" parenting instead. Being sneaky doesn't have to mean being underhanded or manipulative. "Sneaky parenting' is actually 'smart parenting,'" says parenting educator Sharon Silver of Tucson, AZ, the author of *Stop Reacting and Start Responding*. "It means approaching kids sideways instead of straight on, and using calmness, respect, and some creativity to get things done the way you'd like." The following tactics, which revolve around asking your child's opinion and giving her choices, are often all it takes to get her to do what you want. She'll probably even think it was her idea!

#### DINNERTIME DYNAMICS

**The power struggle:** Your child refuses all veggies, eats only orange food, or never seems hungry. You know by now that she won't starve, but you resent her attitude.

#### SNEAKY STRATEGIES

**Start small.** Give picky eaters little portions of everything

you're serving, then let them choose what they want to eat, if anything, says Pacific Palisades, CA, child-development and behavior specialist Betsy Brown Braun, author of *You're Not the Boss of Me: Brat-Proofing Your Four- to Twelve-Year-Old Child*. The key to your sneakiness: Don't say a word about the actual food, and no pushing your child to try "just a bite." "Talk about your day, the weather, anything other than food, since that's what picky eaters are waiting for—a chance to fight with you," says Brown Braun.

**Dish up dessert.** If you know your child is just waiting for dessert, make sure it's super small, like one chocolate kiss or a vanilla-wafer cookie, Brown Braun adds. You can even put it on the plate with dinner so your child knows that's all she gets. That way, there's no more bargaining with your child to eat "real food" in return for sweets. She gets dessert no matter what, and you won't feel like you're caving in because the treat is so small and unexciting. Plus, there's no way it will fill her up, so she'll have to go back to her entrée!

**Offer an option.** Have one unchanging food alternative



Let the costume parade begin—and just try to look the other way as he goes out the door.

your child can make herself. It should be easy, nutritious, something you always have on hand, and not require cooking. Think yogurt, hummus, or even the good old PB&J sandwich, suggests child and family therapist (and mom of three kids) Wendy Young of Newberry, MI. "It's important for stubborn kids to be in charge of the alternate food," she says. After a few meals of this, most kids will weary of preparing (and eating) their "alternate" food and give in to what you're serving. If your child decides to eat nothing at all, Young suggests calmly acknowledging, "No problem. We'll have a big breakfast tomorrow." Really stubborn kids can carry this on for a long time, so be prepared. The most important thing here is to not overreact. Encouraging your child to eat a variety of foods is the main objective. And tastes change, so what a child refuses today may be a fave in a few months.

#### WARDROBE WILLFULNESS

**The power struggle:** Your budding fashionista pushes to wear clothes you think look inappropriate or continually changes her outfits during your time-pressed morning rush.

interesting costume choices each day. My son is now choosing his own clothes," recalls therapist Young. "Eventually my son's friends started challenging him with comments like 'What's up with that color combo?' I no longer needed to be the clothing police because they took on the job!"

**Ignore the weather.** As for the temperature, Silver says to let it go. If your child doesn't want to wear a jacket, "Stay quiet, then listen for the chattering teeth in the backseat or while you're walking," she suggests. You could also let your kid stow it in his backpack "just in case." Sneaky parents let strong-willed kids figure out the value of outerwear on their own, because that's usually how they learn best.

#### BEDTIME BATTLES

**The power struggle:** Your child dawdles or argues with you over every bedtime-preparation move. It's becoming a nightly sparring period for your family.

#### SNEAKY STRATEGIES

**Establish a connection.** Before actually moving your kids toward the bedroom, use a technique psychotherapist Susan

#### SNEAKY STRATEGIES

**Clean the closet.** First off, having too many clothes adds fuel to the fire here. If your child's closet is bulging, either rotate a chunk of clothes every few weeks (move the extras into bins and store them someplace out of her sight) or simply put away the out-of-season clothes, says parenting educator Silver, the founder of Proactive Parenting ([proactiveparenting.net](http://proactiveparenting.net)). If there's anything in your child's closet that you consider inappropriate (too-tight pants, tank tops in winter), you're the parent: Remove them. Argument over.

**Pick your battles.** "I always give my son Joe, who's eight, two choices of shirts. My sneaky approach is that they're both options I'm happy with, so whichever one he picks is okay with me," says Portland, OR, mom Maggie Gilroy. You can also make laying out the next day's clothing part of your family's before-bed routine, to head off those morning "I don't know what to wear!" meltdowns.

With older kids, you'll cool their headstrong attitude further if you just try to live with some of their odd clothing combos. "I told my son's teacher, 'Be ready for a parade of

Stiffelman, of Malibu, CA, calls "Connect Before You Direct." Take a few minutes to sit beside your child and show interest in the game he's playing or TV show he's watching. Ask a few well-placed questions or say something supportive like "I can see why you like this show—it's really funny!" When kids feel connected to you, they're much more likely to do what you ask next, says Stiffelman, the author of *Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm, and Connected*.

**Tune in.** Stores and movie producers employ music to influence people's moods all the time. Kellie Pease, a mom of three in Derby, CT, finds that calming music subliminally puts her kids into bedtime mode without her needing to say a word. Each kid has a favorite disc she pops into the CD player in their room (or in the bathroom if they're bathing) to help them wind down. This works especially well with strong-willed kids, who may have a hard time relaxing.

**Negotiate a new bedtime.** Bigger kids' sleep habits are starting to change as they head toward tweendom. If you prefer your child be in bed with the lights out at 8:30 P.M., but he swears he's not tired until 9 P.M., strike a deal that he must be in his room and quiet—not coming out repeatedly to bug you—at 8:30. Then he can stay up and read or play quietly, and you'll trust him to put himself into bed when 9 P.M. rolls around. Strong-willed kids see this kind of deal as a "win" on their part because it gives them an added measure of independence. But be clear that if your child breaks the deal—by being loud, coming out of his room, or ignoring the new curfew—you'll go back to the earlier lights-out time.

#### CHORE WARS

**The power struggle:** Your kids take as *l-o-n-g* as possible to pick up their stuff, find inventive ways to get out of cleaning their rooms, or just plain say "No! I'm not gonna!"

#### SNEAKY STRATEGIES

**Pick a winner.** All kids—not just argumentative ones—feel a little measure of control when they get a say in their chores, so try that first. Have your child pick a household job instead of assigning her one, or let her choose a chore (which you've written on a slip of paper) from a "chore jar."

**Make a swap.** If there's a particular job your child avoids, consider that there might be a good reason. Our younger daughter, Flora, used to drag her heels over bringing up toilet paper from the basement to replenish the bathroom shelves. One Saturday my husband, Greg, marched downstairs with her to make sure she got the job done...and quickly realized she was afraid of bugs in the basement closet—for good

reason! "I saw a big, nasty spider hiding in the corner and realized Flora worried about this every time she went to the basement," Greg told me. He softened immediately and offered her a chore swap. She volunteered to feed our parakeets instead, and both daddy and daughter were satisfied.

**Think positive.** Use encouraging words, rather than threats, to help take the "fight" out of obstinate kids, says Stiffelman. If your child says "I wanna go to Colin's house," instead of nagging him about what he has to do to earn that privilege, smile brightly and say "Sure, you certainly can do that...as soon as you finish the yard work."

#### HOMEWORK HASSLES

**The power struggle:** Your child constantly whines for your help when you know she's capable of doing homework herself, or is still finishing up assignments when it's bedtime.

#### SNEAKY STRATEGIES

**Break it down.** First, consider that your child's stubbornness or whining may actually be a sign that she's overwhelmed by her schoolwork or has trouble focusing. If that's the case, try breaking down her tasks into smaller increments (two math problems, three spelling words written out, etc.) and letting her jump up and down or run laps

around the room as a break before she goes back for more work. Use the timer approach for tough cases: Your child works for ten minutes, takes a one- to two-minute break, then works for another ten minutes. Most kids can do almost anything for just ten minutes at a stretch!

**Make it fun.** Could your son do his required reading in a tent you make with a table and a sheet? By flashlight in a dark room? Could your child practice her spelling while bouncing a ball or jumping rope (as the main character did in the movie *Akeelah and the Bee*)? Give it a shot.

**Do a disappearing act.** If you're

confident your child really can handle things on her own, purposely move to a different part of the house while she does her homework, suggests Brown Braun. Make it a rule that she must come to you if she has any questions, not vice versa. Of course, you'll want to check in with her about half-way through and at the end to be sure she's on track. But if your student has to climb a flight of stairs to ask for help or lug a heavy textbook to you, she may learn to take a minute to think on her own before she seeks you out. ★

Teri Cettina is a Parenting contributing editor in Portland, OR. Her favorite sneaky strategy is having her two school-age daughters choose their own chores from a jar.

“THE WHINING may actually be a sign that she's overwhelmed by her homework. BREAK IT INTO TEN-MINUTE CHUNKS—and let her jump around in between.”