

The Cure for Whining

Should they get what they want by whining?

Absolutely not. Should they learn that they can get their way by marshaling good arguments and making them in a reasonable, humorous, charming way that meets your needs as well as theirs? Absolutely, if you want them to get anywhere in life. But how to help them make that transition?



Whining is common with toddlers and preschoolers. Parents are usually advised to tell their kids to ask in a nice voice, because they can't hear the whiny voice. But whining is a symptom of a deeper issue. So if you want to eliminate whining, you have to address what's underneath. If your child's whining is driving you crazy, here are six parent-proven secrets to stop your child from whining. Which secret you use depends on why he's whining.

1. Whining because he doesn't have the internal resources to cope with what's being asked of him:

When humans feel overwhelmed, they get whiny. (As a toddler, he would have thrown himself howling to the ground, but by three or four he can often whine instead.) Meet his basic needs for food, rest, down time, run-around time, and connection with you, or you can count on whining. He may not tantrum as much as he used to, but he will certainly whine if you force him to endure that shopping trip while he's hungry and tired. Why create a negative situation from which he'll learn and repeat?

2. Whining because she needs more connection:

Be pre-emptive. Make sure that your child gets enough of your positive attention, unprovoked. Pre-empt whining by giving attention BEFORE she gets demanding. Anyone who's had to ask a romantic partner "Do you love me?" knows that attention given after you ask can never really fill the need. The secret is to take the initiative and give attention the child hasn't asked for, often, so she feels your support and connection. And of course it's particularly important to give attention when she shows the first sign of needing your emotional support, before that quick downhill slide. (No, you're not rewarding "bad" behavior by giving her attention when she's whining. If she

were whining from hunger, would you think you were rewarding that by feeding her? It's our job to meet kids' needs so they have the internal resources to cope. That includes giving them our loving presence so they feel safe and loved.)

3. Whining because she doesn't like what's happening but feels powerless to get her way:

Lawrence Cohen says, *"When children whine they are feeling powerless. If we scold them for whining or refuse to listen to them we increase their feelings of powerlessness. If we give in so they will stop whining, we reward that powerlessness. But if we relaxedly, playfully, invite them to use a strong voice, we increase their sense of confidence and competence. And we find a bridge back to close connection."*

Start by letting her know that you hear what she wants, and you see her point of view: *"You really want to go to the playground, and you keep telling me that, and here I keep stopping at all these stores that you aren't expecting, and you're disappointed, right?"* Sometimes just feeling heard is enough to stop whining in its tracks.

Then, if she keeps whining, you can say playfully *"You don't sound like yourself. I wonder where your usual strong voice went?"* Express confidence that your child can use her "strong" voice and offer your assistance to help her find it. Finally, give her alternate tools by teaching her how to ask appropriately for something and negotiate with you. Since whining is so often a function of powerlessness, helping your child to feel that she can get what she wants through reasonable measures will carry over into the rest of her life.

In other words, you don't want her to learn that she gets her way in life by whining or tantrumming, but you do want her to learn that she can get what she wants through managing her emotions, seeing things from the other person's point of view and setting up win/win situations. (And of course, that's what you always try to model.)

So if you simply don't have time to go to the playground today, then don't. Be empathic about his desire, and nurture him through the meltdown, as described in #4 below. But if your objection is to his whining, rather than his request, and he manages to pull himself together and ask in a reasonable way for what he wants, then you'll be able to engage in the kind of conflict resolution that finds a win/win solution.

“Ok, you want to go to the playground, and I need to stop at the hardware store. Let’s do this: If we’re really quick at the hardware store, we’ll have time to stop at the playground on the way home. Think you can help me be quick? And if you are really fast about getting in and out of your car seat, we can stay even longer at the playground.”

Are you "rewarding" whining? No, you're empowering him by demonstrating that finding solutions that work for both of you is the way to get what he wants in life.

4. Whining because he needs to cry:

He has a lot of pent-up emotions about things that are stressing him -- the new babysitter you left him with on Friday night, that kid who grabbed the truck away in the sandbox, potty training, the new baby -- there's no end of stressful developmental challenges! Toddlers let off stress by simply having a meltdown, but as they get older they gain more self-control, and begin to whine instead. Be kind in response to his whining until you get home and have a few minutes to spend with him. Then draw him onto your lap, look him in the eye and say *"I notice you were feeling so whiny and sad, Sweetie. Do you just need to cuddle and maybe cry a bit? Everybody needs to cry sometimes. I'm right here to hold you."*

5. Whining because it works:

Don't reward whining. Don't give in and buy the candy. But there is never a reason to be less than kind about it. Responding to his desire with empathy (*"You wish you could have that candy"*) helps him feel less alone with his disappointment. And there's nothing wrong with finding something else that will make him happy, like a shiny red apple or a trip to the playground. That teaches him to look for win/win solutions. If, by contrast, he feels like he only gets what he wants by whining, he'll become an expert whiner.

6. Whining because you'll do anything to stop it:

Change your attitude. Why do parents hate whining so much? Because whining is your little one's more mature form of crying. She's letting you know she needs your attention. And human grownups are programmed to react to whining as much as to

crying, so the needs of tiny humans get met. So the minute you hear that whine, you react with anxiety. You'll do anything to stop it.

But if you can take a deep breath and remind yourself that there's no crisis, you'll feel a lot better, and you'll parent better. Don't let your automatic crisis mode of fight or flight kick in. Don't feel like you have to do anything at all except love your child. Just smile at your child and give her a big hug. Most of the time, the whining will stop.

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