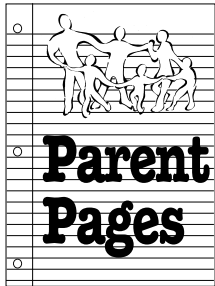


Does Telling Kids to be "Nice" Work?



Take a preschooler to a hands-on science museum or other public place where there's lots of stuff to "play" with, and above the din you're bound to hear a common refrain. From the water table to the build-the-arch board, parent after parent exhorts her children to "Be nice!"

If you find those words coming out of your own mouth, don't waste your breath. Just saying the words won't get the results you want.

"Be nice" is an abstraction that carries a wealth of meaning for adults, but says little to young children. When it comes to teaching children to get along with each other, known as pro-social behaviors, adults have to be a lot more precise than, "Be nice." In small steps, by words and deeds, adults must convey to children exactly how they want them to behave.

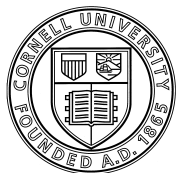
In situations like a visit to the science museum what adults often mean by "Be nice," is for children to wait patiently until it's their turn to stand on the what-you-weigh-on-the-moon scale or to use the big red scoop in the sand table. Barging into the front of the line or grabbing the scoop from another child's hands is definitely out. Yet, both of these physical means of getting what they want (that adults find so embarrassing) are natural to preschoolers.

Young children are very egocentric – their focus is on themselves and their needs, with very little capacity to take the perspective of what other people want or need. If they see something that interests them, they want it right then and there. For them it's that simple. What's more, until they become skillful in using language, the only way they know how to express themselves is physically. So the "natural" way to get something is to grab it. The way to be first in line is to push right in. For parents to be successful in teaching children pro-social behaviors it's useful to start by recognizing where children are developmentally and tone down the value judgments. Value judgments cloud the issue and take attention away from the task at hand, which is teaching not judging. How young children behave isn't a question of good or bad, it's just what children do until they're taught otherwise.

Consider these three guidelines when teaching prosocial behaviors to children:

- Emphasize consideration for others' needs.
- Model those pro-social behaviors you want children to learn.
- Identify and label precisely what you want the child to do.

~Continued~



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Let's see how these principles work in real life. Suppose your child and another child are playing in a sandbox, both of them intent on using the same shovel. Your child has it first.

Begin by saying to your child, *"Are you using that?"* (Because you eventually want your child to say for herself, *"I'm using it."*)

Then to the other child, *"Would you like a turn?"* (Because that's what you eventually want children to say it for themselves. You also want your child to recognize there's another child in the picture.)

You might even press the point further by saying to your child, *"See he wants a turn. There are lots of people who would like to use these toys."* So you would add, "When you're finished, he'd like a turn. Remember, he'd like a turn."

While the other child waits, you might recognize how tough that is for him by saying, *"It's hard to wait. She'll be done in a minute."* (Another alternative is to redirect the other child's attention by helping him to find another toy to play with in the meantime, *"Ah, look there's a yellow shovel."*)

After your child has played for awhile, give some warning that her time with the toy is nearly up, *"In a minute it's going to be his turn."*

Then, *"Time's up. It's his turn now. It's his turn, say bye bye to the toy. Give the toy to him."*

Once she's handed it over, tell the child how their actions have affected the other child, for they don't automatically "know" this. *"Thank you for sharing. Look at his face, at how happy he is."*

And to the other child, *"Thank your for waiting. You waited for my child to finish. Thank you."*

In this scenario, the adult acknowledges what each child wants and shows how to use language to express that desire. The adult shows the children how to recognize the needs of the other and tells each child precisely what to do. Finally the adult praises each child for his actions. It's all done in way that's kind, considerate and fair to both.

The same three principles applied in this situation go for teaching the other pro-social behaviors we associate with "Being nice": helping, showing sympathy and kindness, sharing, taking the perspective of others, showing affection, and playing cooperatively.

In each case don't underestimate the power of your own behavior. Children learn by watching how adults act toward them and toward others. If we want children to be considerate of others, we need to be considerate too.

*Source: Judith Ross Bernstein, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.*