



“I REALLY MEAN IT!!”

by D. Keith Osborn, Ph.D.

A series of articles edited by D. Keith Osborn, Ph.D.,
Professor, Child Development and Education,
The University of Georgia

Years ago, I was camp director in a children's camp. I can still hear Wally, one of our counselors, screaming at the top of his lungs, “I really mean it, you guys! This is the *third* time I'm going to tell you, ‘this is your *last* chance to quiet down!’”

Several minutes passed. Two boys started a pillow fight. Others threw comic books and generally created a disturbance. Finally, Wally shouted over the noise and confusion, “All right, you guys . . . see what happens when you fuss and fight? Now this is the *fourth* time I'm going to say ‘This is your *last* chance to quiet down and get to bed!’” The next day I overheard two of the campers talking in the camp store. One said, “I bet you a candy bar that tonight Wally will say, ‘*This is the last time*’—at least six times!” The other camper responded, “It's a bet—but I think I'll lose.”

In this example we can see that the campers were learning quite a lot. Unfortunately, they were not learning healthful rules about bedtime. Rather, they were learning that roughhousing, fighting, and other types of misbehavior help to delay the unpleasant process of going to bed. By creating disturbances, they were able to delay bedtime and stay up later each evening. They learned that often adults say one thing, but really mean another. In addition, “bugging the counselor” had become a very rewarding experience as the campers tried out various ways to harass this representative of the adult world.

Last week, at a local supermarket, I observed a similar situation. A three-year-old boy was riding down the aisle in a shopping cart. As his mother pushed the cart past the candy section, the child grabbed several bars of candy from a shelf. The following conversation took place:

Mother: “Put that candy back—we have some at home.”

Child: “I want candy now!”

Mother: “No, it will spoil your lunch.”

Child (whining): “Candy—I want candy!”

Mother: “Will you please put that candy back—I said ‘No’”

Child (still whining): “Can't I have just *one*—please!”

Mother (exasperated): “All right—since you said ‘please’—you may have *one*.”

Please note that this three-year-old child is also learning. Unfortunately, he is learning to manipulate his mother. This mother's type of inconsistency encourages children to test adults and the limits they set. In our example, the child has learned that his mother did not really mean what she said,

and he has taken advantage of her indecisiveness. One of the most difficult tasks that parents face in raising a family is learning how to treat children in a reasonably consistent manner. One can easily create bad habits in children by alternating between “being firm” and then “giving in.” This type of parental behavior is instructive to children—it teaches them to test limits.

At a very early age children learn that in many situations the adult may actually be making two statements: an oral statement and an implied statement. The oral statement is the statement you actually make; the implied statement is what you really mean. In our examples, the children chose to ignore the oral statement since they had learned that the adults really did not mean what they said. The adults plainly did not intend—or did not know how—to enforce the oral statement. Realizing this, the children went ahead and did as they pleased.

If you are having difficulty “really meaning it!”—perhaps the following suggestions will be helpful.

Be consistent. In our examples the adults were inconsistent. When the parent alternates between “being firm” and “giving in”—the child becomes confused. We must emphasize that even when parents are inconsistent and unsure, children are learning. However, the child will be learning to constantly test limits, in an effort to determine whether adults really mean what they say. The child will also learn that persistence in “testing” may get the rules changed—in the child's favor.

Does the child understand? Ask yourself if your child comprehends the meaning of your request. Sometimes we unknowingly confuse children, and they simply do not understand what we expect of them. (Demanding that a two-year-old share toys is an example of expecting more than most two-year-olds can deliver. Expecting a three- or four-year-old to *always* say “Please” is likewise unreasonable.) In most situations, young children will not intentionally defy authority and disobey. They usually do not understand what to do or they are not sufficiently mature—to carry out the request being made by the adult.

Follow through. You may be having trouble “really meaning it” if you tell a child to do something and then do not follow through. While it may sometimes be easier to ignore misbehavior than to enforce something you have said, you are falsely buying time, because the child is

learning that you do not really mean what you say. As a general rule, it is better to allow a child to continue an activity—than to tell him to stop and then fail to enforce your decision. Wait until you are ready to enforce a rule, and then be clear and decisive in its enforcement.

Do you have too many rules? Sometimes parents who have

problems “really meaning it” have placed too many prohibitions on their children. In the face of so many rules and regulations, it is difficult to enforce everything. Re-examine your rules and see if they are reasonable and appropriate for your children. Many teachers agree, “The fewer rules you have, the fewer rules children can break!”

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World Book-Childcraft
Pre-school Service Program
510 Merchandise Mart, Chicago, Illinois 60654
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