

The Best Way to Establish Your Authority as a Parent

Children need to respect their parents' authority. This is an essential part of a healthy upbringing – particularly when children are very young.

There are many reasons for respecting parental authority. For starters, it facilitates the smooth functioning of the home. For example, if I ask my five-year-old daughter to clean up her toys, she should do that with minimal fuss. It's also critical to children's safety. If I tell my three-year-old son not to run into the street, he had better obey me. His life depends on it.

Respect for parental authority is also important for a child's overall development. Dr. Carl E. Pickhardt [writes](#) in *Psychology Today*:

In childhood, the benefit of parental authority is that it gives structure and direction to a child's life – parents declaring what to do, what not to do, what is right, what is wrong, what works, what doesn't work. It gives the child a reference for making decisions that they can internalize and follow without having to figure out how to believe and behave entirely on their own. The child needs this foundation for safe and healthy functioning.

A great way for parents to establish their authority is to try to always mean what they say. That's hard, but here are three areas to help parents get started:

1. Don't Make Empty Threats

I regularly hear parents make threats that they would not or could not fulfill. I've heard extreme examples like, "If you don't go to bed right now, I am going to cut your head off."

But there are also more mild ones like, “If you don’t get in the car right now, I’m going to leave without you.”

I confess to saying the latter one myself. An empty threat may be effective once or twice, but even young children will quickly grasp that their parents don’t actually mean it. In the long term, empty threats diminish parental authority.

2. Don’t Make Empty Promises

The flip side of not making empty threats is not making empty promises. If a parent tells a child they will do something, the child should be able to take that promise to the bank.

I try to carefully monitor what I say to my kids so I’m not stuck with a promise I can’t keep. For example, my daughter might ask if we can go to park tomorrow. It’s easy for me to respond, “Sure, we can do that,” because I do intend to take her. But the truth is that any number of unexpected circumstances – a migraine, a thunder storm, COVID-19, etc. – could force me to cancel the trip. So it’s better for me to say, “Perhaps. Let’s see in the morning.”

3. Follow Your Words With Deeds

I frequently witness parents casually tossing commands at their kids that they have no intention of enforcing. Often it is because they are absorbed in their phones. They repeat the command multiple times while the kid ignores them. In the end, the parent either lets it go or blows up in anger. Either way, their authority is diminished.

Say I ask my daughter to go put on her pajamas and she doesn’t. This means I have to get up and make her put them on, preferably in a calm manner. If I’m not prepared to do that, it’s better for me to stay silent.

Parents should always mean what they say to their kids. This is one of the best ways to establish authority. It can be hard, but in the long run it will reduce disciplinary issues and make every member of the family safer and happier.

What are some areas you've noticed where parents should watch their words so they can be sure they actually mean what they say?

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