



Growing Concerns

A childrearing question-and-answer column

with Dr. Marti Erickson

Question: My wife keeps telling me that I give in to everything our kids want, that I'm never willing to say no to them. She's probably right, but I find myself just not able to make them unhappy by denying them what they ask for, whether it's material things or privileges. Any words of wisdom for a dad who's too much of a softie?

Answer: Oh yes, kids can break our hearts, can't they? And sometimes it's just so much easier to give in than to hold fast to what we know deep-down is right. However, keeping an eye on the long-term goal of parenting sometimes helps to strengthen our resolve. We need to ask ourselves, "What kind of a person do I want my children to become?" Always giving in to children's pleading sends them a clear message that pleading is the way to succeed. And that's not the message most of us want for our kids.

So, next time your kids are pushing for something you're not sure is best for them, try these three steps and see how they work for you:

- Take a deep breath and say you need to think about it for a while. Then get all the information you need in order to weigh the pros and cons, making an unrushed decision based on careful thought. Sometimes kids create a sense of urgency that makes us think we have to give an answer right on the spot. But making a thoughtful, planful decision sets a good example for our children -- and it allows us to discern more clearly when it's time to say "no" and when it's fine to say "yes."
- Listen to your children's wishes and feelings -- and acknowledge them. Even when you decide it's not best to fulfill their hearts' desires, a simple "I can see that you really want this" at least lets them know you take their feelings seriously.
- When your answer is "no," state it gently but firmly, and give a clear, straightforward reason your children can understand. Then stick to your decision, no matter how much pleading follows. If it's appropriate, you might suggest an alternative -- something else you would allow your children to do. Or, if it's a material thing they wanted and you aren't willing to pop for the cost, engage your children in figuring out with you how they might earn it over time. Learning to delay gratification and pursue a goal are important parts of growing up!

No doubt some of your decisions won't win you a popularity contest in the short run, but the rewards for you and your kids will be great in the long run. Although they may not tell you this until they are 30, over time your children will come to see you have their best interest at heart. And you will be helping them develop a deeper sense of appreciation for the things and the privileges that are theirs.