

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Getting Hippos To Eat Their Veggies

Never try to force a hippopotamus to clean up after itself. It won't work. You'll end up with a stubborn hippopotamus who refuses to budge. Uncooperative hippos have infiltrated homes everywhere. They're called progeny, or children.

As a counselor, I hear the stories of countless frustrated parents who can't get their kids to clean their rooms, do their homework, pick up their dirty clothes, put their toys away, feed the dog, take out the trash, close the screen door ... gently, put the milk away, remove muddy shoes, or go to bed on time.

These parents may start out with a calmly spoken directive like: "Pick up your things," or "Eat your peas." But after repeating that command three or four times, pleasantries go out the window. That's when parents are likely to lose their cool and start barking orders with an intensity that rivals a drill sergeant.

It's a fact that we humans are far more agreeable and cooperative when we're not ordered to do something. Demand breeds resistance. An effective way to win cooperation is by offering choices. Think about it: If a boss abruptly announces that work schedules will be adjusted, or that offices will be switched around, we're less resistant if we're given some choices, such as: "Would you like to work in this corner or that corner, do you want to adjust your hours one hour forward or back?"

By having some say in the matter, we feel respected. Respect breeds cooperation. The same logic holds true of children. When given choices, they feel their fledgling autonomy is being respected.

Some examples include: "What do you want to put on first—your shirt or your pants?" "Which of these three outfits do you want to wear tomorrow?" "Do you want to brush your teeth with the purple toothbrush or the blue one?" "As a chore, do you want to clean the litter box, or empty the dishwasher?" "Do you want to put your toys away before your bath or after?" "Do you want to start your homework at 6:00 or 6:30?" "Do you want to eat eight peas or six?" Suppose your child truly hates peas. In that case, the question can be, "Do you want to eat six peas or a carrot?"

With this technique, a parent's unwavering authority is ever present in the implicit rules.

Without stating it directly, the child hears: "Not getting dressed isn't an option, and you must prepare for school the night before. Brushing your teeth is part of the daily routine, as are chores, taking baths and doing homework. Picking up dirty clothes and putting toys away are things expected of you. And when it comes to food, eating healthy isn't something you can opt out of."

A distinct structure consisting of limits and rules is firmly in place and understood by all.

Abby and Bryan, parents of three children, ranging in age from 6 to 10, have finally attained some relief by using this technique. Before learning their new skills, they belonged to the Hair-pulling Club of Exasperated Parents, rundown and battle-worn from seemingly endless power struggles.

In a counseling session, Abby's excitement was evident as she talked about the improvements she was beginning to see. "Kitchen duty ran smoothly," she said. "The usual struggles and grumpiness were missing."

She told me what she did differently: "Instead of telling them, 'You need to help me get ready,' or 'You need to set the table,' or 'You need to clean up,' I asked, 'Do you want to help me get ready or clean up later?'"

She added, "Giving them a choice took the argument out of it."

Abby's tone of voice made a difference, too. She was calm—not irritated or bossy. She now uses the same voice when asking: "Do you want to play one more minute or two?" And when they're fighting, she asks: "Are you going to work this out or stop talking to each other?"

Bryan described a short family trip that was to include picking blueberries. They ran out of time so the blueberry picking was canceled. One son was terribly disappointed, so Bryan offered a choice: "Hey, do you want to quickly pick 10 blueberries or 20?" His son chose 20 and walked away peacefully—fully content.

The couple has noticed the children emulating the technique. Instead of fighting over an electronic game, the older son offered a choice to his younger brother: "Do you want to play for 10 or 15 minutes before it's my turn?" The younger brother's choice isn't difficult to imagine, but what's important to note is that cooperation and positive interaction were spawned.

Using this technique, the "hippos" are now cleaning up after themselves, pitching in and eating their vegetables. Bryan and Abby are smiling.