

Question: How can I get my baby (12 months old) to understand “no?”

Babies are born primed to communicate. The way we talk, the expressions on our faces and in our eyes, what we look at and our gestures influence how our children learn to understand what we want to communicate which, in turn, helps them learn to communicate in the future.

There are many things you can do to help your baby understand what you are saying by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Be clear about what you want to communicate.

Helping your child learn to understand the word NO starts with understanding what YOU want to communicate and how you want to communicate it. If you say NO, but don't really mean it, your child will be able to sense that. So, make sure you only say NO when you mean it.

2

Use your tone of voice to help your baby understand.

Babies can tell the difference between a stern tone of voice and a pleasant, soothing one. In one experiment, Anne Fernald of Stanford University tape recorded parents saying things that conveyed approval or disapproval in several different languages—French, German, Italian, Japanese, British English and American English. She and her colleagues then tested five-month-old American babies with these “messages” in unfamiliar languages. Even when they didn't understand the language, the babies could understand the difference between a positive and a negative tone of voice:

These American babies would hear the praise and they would smile and relax; they would hear the [disapproval] and they would stiffen a little and their eyes would widen. These sounds—in a different language, from a total stranger—had predictable effects on babies' behavior.

Given how sensitive babies are to adults' tone of voice, it isn't necessary to overdo it. You can say NO in a firm tone of voice, but not overly stern. The time for using a louder tone of voice is if you need to protect your child from an immediate danger—like touching a hot stove or running into the street. There is no reason to be harsh.

3

Give the reasons for NO.

Even if your baby doesn't fully understand your words, follow up the NO with a short explanation.

- "Touching something hot will hurt."
- "If you hit your sister, it hurts her."

This kind of discipline (called other-oriented discipline by Martin Hoffman of New York University) helps build cooperation because children begin to learn how their actions affect themselves and others. Discipline means "to teach".

4

Use body language.

Susan Goldin-Meadow of the University of Chicago has found that when parents gesture, children are more likely to gesture, and they learn more words.

You can use hand gestures to help your baby understand your meaning. For example, you can point to a particular object with your NO, such as pointing to the hot stove.

5

Say YES when you can.

Save NO for the situations that you are serious about. Most of the time, be positive or redirect your child so he or she isn't always hearing NO. Saying YES makes your job more fun and saves NO for when it really matters.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests the following:

6

Don't punish your baby with spanking, shouting or overly long explanations.

A firm "No!" is the best way to deal with minor irritations (just as "Yes!" is a great way to reward good behavior).

7

Distract your child with something new.

Get your child's attention or direct her to a new activity to reduce unwanted behavior.