

# Whine? Not! Four Ways to Deal with Whining Children

From Parents Magazine

I have to say, my daughter, Avery, is already somewhat of an overachiever. She always runs when she could walk, she routinely gobbles down her dinner so she can finish before everyone else at the table, and she insists on climbing higher than all the kids on the jungle gym (luckily, I have a strong stomach). But I'd be remiss not to include this less-than-desirable distinction: Avery is also a world-class whiner, griping at a jaw-dropping pitch for such lengths that she can easily outdo any other 4-year-old in a single squawk session.

Avery's impassioned approach to life is refreshing, but her overzealous whining? Not so much. Whether she's begging for a brownie or pining for a new pet, her tenacious requests try my nerves. However, my mind -- and my eardrums -- were put to rest by some expert reassurance: "Whining is totally normal," says Janeen Hayward, a licensed clinical professional counselor and founder of Swellbeing, a parenting resource in New York City. Virtually all kids become pros at the shrill mewling that serves as a desperate plea for something (usually an item they know they can't have) and yet also expresses a feeling of powerlessness that crying or talking doesn't. "Three- and 4-year-olds whine frequently because they have big expectations and desires, but don't always get their way or have the ability to do the task at hand," explains Hayward.

Sure, it's comforting to confirm that Avery is simply expressing her needs like the rest of her pals. But it's also frustrating to realize that such an annoying behavior is so incredibly effective. The second she begins howling, I usually fulfill her request no matter how outrageous it is (chocolate milk in bed!), simply to stop the noise and save my sanity. Of course, I'm only making the problem worse. "When you give in to your child's demands immediately, you're reinforcing her behavior," Hayward points out. Ready to wipe out the gripes? Use these tips to win the war on whining.

## Step 1: React

Put away the earplugs and take action. "Kids can whine all day, easily outlasting a parent who is trying to tune it out," says Rene Hackney, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist in Alexandria, Virginia. "The longer you let your child complain, the more determined she'll become to get her way." Instead, help your child understand that her whining voice is very hard to listen to. You can say, "I can't understand you when you whine. If you want to tell me how you feel, then I need you to use your regular voice." Don't assume she knows what it means to whine. Demonstrate how it sounds by whining back at her, suggests Hayward. Also, take stock of whether she may be whining because she's tired or hungry. Sticking to a nap schedule and stashing a snack in your purse for outings can help prevent a major meltdown.

## Step 2: Relate

Try to get to the bottom of your kid's bellyaching. Is he whining because he's trying to control a situation? If that's the case, give him a job that relates to that specific scenario. For instance, if he whines about how long you're taking at the supermarket, let him choose which apples to bag or how many bagels to buy.

Is he simply venting? Just as you like to gripe to your partner about a bad day at work or a stressful exchange with another mom, 3- and 4-year-olds need to express themselves too. You might start by saying, "I know you really want to have an extra balloon, but each child gets only one at the party," Dr. Hackney advises. This will validate his feelings and also give him a reason why you're rejecting his request.

### Step 3: Rephrase

Whenever I take Avery along to the drugstore, she pleads at the top of her lungs when she sees the seductive selection of candy at the checkout aisle. To keep her quiet (and to avoid the cashier's scowls), I usually give in to her squeals for chocolate within a nano-second. Dr. Hackney suggests a better strategy, which will keep both me and the dentist happy: "Ask her to use her nice voice and to say please, and demonstrate exactly what to say and how to say it. Once she does that, you can then respond to her request with a yes or a reasoned no."

Although you may be tempted to punish your child if she continues to whine, that's not the best solution, says Hayward. "Taking away something like a favorite toy or a special privilege doesn't teach kids how to engage in a positive way in order to get what they're after and just ends up adding to their feelings of powerlessness."

### Step 4: Reward

When your preschooler does ask you for something in a calm, sweet way ("Can I please have a cookie?"), it's a perfect opportunity to recognize and reinforce his good behavior. "Don't be afraid to gush! You can say, 'Wow, what a lovely way to ask. That sounded so nice,' " says Dr. Hackney. Even if you refuse his request ("We are going to save our appetite for dinner and skip the cookie now"), pointing out how well he used his good voice will make him less likely to resort to whining next time. You'll be relieved you've silenced the din, and he'll have learned how to make himself heard.

*Originally published in the January 2011 issue of Parents magazine.*

**Parents** Parents.com

© Copyright 2013, Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved.