

Setting Limits with a Timer

If you're like most parents, you struggle with the question of how to motivate your children to do what you want them to do. All too often parents end up yelling or threatening in order to get their children to comply with their requests. Children and parents get used to this pattern of resistance and hostility, but no one really likes it.

Most children don't care if the towels are on the floor, or if they're late for nursery school. Their needs and desires are different than those of their parents. Once you realize that getting into a battle isn't the only road to take, you'll discover other creative and respectful ways to encourage cooperative behavior.

Here's an example of something you can do instead of getting frustrated and angry.

William, (age 4, slow to adapt and active) is playing with his Legos. They're spread out all over the living room. It's almost dinner time, and his grandmother is coming over.

Mother: (Calling from the kitchen.) William, it's almost time for dinner, please clean up your toys.

William: OK mom.

Mother: (A few minutes later, she comes into the living room.) William, I told you to clean up and you haven't even started yet.

William: Oh mom, I just need to finish this one building. I'll do it soon.

Mother: (Raising her voice.) I said now! Not soon!

William: OK, just a minute mom.

Mother: (she notices that her neck is getting tight and she's starting to mumble under her breath. If she continues down this path, she will be yelling at William in just a few seconds. She may even get so mad as to throw his toys or take them away. Instead she sees the timer on the TV and has an idea.) William, I have a great idea. (He looks up at her.) Let's play "Beat the Clock." I'll give you 3 minutes to finish up your building, and then I'm going to see if you can clean up all of your toys up in only 5 minutes. Do you think you can do it?

William: I don't need to finish the building, lets play beat the clock now.

Mother: Do you want to do it yourself or should I help too?

William: I want to do it myself, with you watching.

Mother: OK! Get ready, get set, go. (Mother sets the timer and even puts on some music. William runs around the room cleaning up as fast as he can.)

William: I did it! I did it and it's not even 5 minutes yet!

Mother: Great job. Maybe tomorrow we can do it again, and if you want to we can set it for 4 minutes instead.

William comes over to his mother and gives her a big hug.

When grandma comes over for dinner, mother makes sure to tell her how well William did at cleaning up his toys and beating the clock.

William's mother had already recognized that what she had been doing (yelling and throwing things) wasn't working for her or her child. That's always the first step. The next step is learning new ways to respond to children.

William needed some time to finish up, and perhaps all he needed was for his mother to set the timer and let him know that he had to stop when he heard the ding. Doing Beat the Clock was added fun that helped motivate him to do his share of the work in a fun way. It's like the Mary Poppins saying, "a spoon full of sugar makes the medicine go down." All of us need motivation to do our jobs. Most people wouldn't go to work each day if they were not motivated by their pay checks.

Other times to use Beat the Clock:

- Getting dressed in the morning. (You may want to have a contest with your child to see who can get dressed the quickest in the morning.)
- Putting P.J.'s on.
- Setting or clearing the table.
- Doing most chores.

Many older children do not respond to the game-like quality of Beat the Clock. If their dawdling is driving you nuts, you can have them clean their room within a set time in order to earn extra time on the computer or time outside with their friends.

If your child doesn't want to play Beat the Clock, don't get into an argument. Set a clear limit and then give a negative consequence if your child doesn't comply.

Key points

Like William's mother, learn to recognize what you're like when you begin to get angry; try to stop and do something different.

Sometimes you can use games and fun to motivate your children. Other times you need to be firm and set consequences for their behavior. Middle ground parenting is when you can move from being flexible to firm as needed. We're suggesting that you don't get stuck in one mode or style. Children need laughter and limits, fun and firmness, softness and seriousness.