

Preschooler behaviour: Who's the Boss?

Does your preschooler tell you he hates you, or not to look at him? Does your child hit you?

When preschoolers tell parents or other family members they hate them or if they hit their parents, it is usually to get out of doing what is asked - to get their own way.

Children this young can learn to manipulate parents through the parent's emotions. *If I make you feel bad about what you are doing, then maybe you will stop making me do...*

To change this behaviour, start by ignoring your child's statements while maintaining your expectation that the child do as told. Discussing your child's statements or answering back gives attention to the behaviour and reinforces it. This will only make it more likely your child will continue to tell you they hate you. In other words, your good intentions backfire. Therefore, do not answer back. Then, when your child does do as told, provide feedback - *now you're putting away your crayons...* or whatever. The key is to not get caught up in your child's negativity - especially with your own. Keep your attention on redirecting your child back to task.

When your child is talking and behaving appropriately, give all kinds of positive attention. We call this "Catch a kid being good". This is also when you say how much you love each other. The challenge is to remember to catch your child when behaving well. This makes a big difference.

As for "don't look at me," preschoolers are beginning to develop a sense of privacy. However, when a preschooler is seeking privacy, they are likely to do so quietly. If a child is seeking privacy to get out of doing as told, then the child is trying to control you. If you submit, your child will be the boss, not you. Remember to ignore, redirect and provide feedback when behaving well.

The same rules hold true for when preschoolers hit their parents. Ignore and redirect to the task at hand. Forgo any discussion on the matter as this only provides attention and actually reinforces the behaviour. Certainly never hit back. This only models bad behaviour and creates anger and resentment in the child. They will only want to get back at you.

When your pre-schooler hits you, you can also use time out. In a firm but quiet voice say, "No hitting." Then take your child quietly by the forearm and lead to a step or chair. Your child should sit there until settled and quiet - and then for five or ten seconds more. Time out is time away from anything fun or rewarding. If you are sending your child to their bedroom and they just go and play, then this is not time out and will only reward misbehaviour. Don't ask your child if he is ready to be quiet or release at their request. You must observe their quiet behaviour. Then you release your child to do as directed. Once listening and doing as told, provide feedback telling your child so. Catch them being good.

If your child is used to being in control of you and you start to turn things around, be prepared for protesting. Your child will not like losing control of you. In the short run your child will try harder to get you to submit to their will. They may tell you louder that they don't love you, they may hit harder and they may scream or tantrum.

You must outlast your child's protesting. If you give in, then you just teach them how demanding they must be in order to get their way again. Giving in while your child is protesting can create worse behaviour. If your child is screaming and yelling while in time out, watch from a distance to make sure they are safe, but otherwise ignore until settled. This can take great patience and you may need support yourself in order to outlast your child.

Behaviour can change rapidly; usually within three to ten days when using these strategies. The first few days can be especially trying. The trick is keeping your cool when under stress, redirecting behaviour where you can, ignoring behaviour that is a nuisance but not serious, using time out for misbehaviour that is truly out of line and most importantly, reinforcing behaviour that is appropriate - catching a kid being good!

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