

Ask Nurse Rona: Time's Up!

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Q: *My 4-year-old loves the Museum and never wants to go home - and she's such a good negotiator I find myself giving in to "just two more minutes" even when we really need to leave. I try to be patient, but I sometimes get upset, which just makes her more resistant. Help!*

A: One of the biggest challenges for parents is learning how to discipline their children with respect and results. Many parents were not happy with the way they were punished when they were young, and yet they're not sure what to do instead.

How to discipline is a complex subject and using an ordinary kitchen timer can be your "ally" in disciplining your child as you work towards peace at home.

Some of the key goals of discipline are to teach children socially acceptable behavior, and teach them how to problem solve and make good choices. Establishing limits and teaching children to live with the consequences of their actions are essential. Being able to stop playing and clean up the toys adds to a child's sense of belonging to a family or school where there is order, not chaos.

Children thrive on having limits that are fair and communicated respectfully. Using a timer can help children know what to expect and when it's going to happen. It can help keep parents calm and in control of themselves. Anything that can help parents stay calm is worth having on hand.

You'll find that your timer will become a friend to you as you teach your child about the limits you've set. A timer doesn't get all huffy when it's called a rotten name, nor is it manipulated by a child's crocodile tears.

When you leave home don't forget to take your timer with you, since discipline is often needed in the car, store, playground -- and at the Museum! Five ways to use a kitchen timer:

1. Setting limits on TV and computer use:

- Set the timer so there won't be any "but mom, I've just been watching for a few minutes." Talk with your children ahead of time about the family rules regarding screen time.
- You can also use the timer to help you when you tell a child they can watch one show while you make dinner. When the timer goes off you'll be sure to check to see that the TV also went off.

2. Ending a game:

- At bedtime children may stall and not end a game so they can avoid going to bed. Set the timer and let them know that you'll play cards with them for 30 minutes.
- If your child begs for more, instead of changing the rules, let them know you can play again the next night as long as they get all their homework done.

3. Getting ready for bed: If bedtime is at 8 PM you can have your children start to do the bedtime routine of brushing teeth, going to the bathroom, getting PJs on at 7:15, and then whatever time is left they can have stories. If you set the timer they will be motivated to do their pre-story tasks so they will have as much time as possible with you. When the timer goes off your child will understand that the stories are over for the night, but if it's a short story, do finish the story instead of stopping on the dime.

4. Preparing to leave the house:

- A difficult transition for children is getting ready to leave the house. Children have a different sense of time than adults and the timer can help keep a child focused.
- Make sure the child has the amount of time she needs to make the transition. Set the timer for getting dressed and you can even suggest they try and "beat the clock."

5. Taking turns:

- The timer is a great help in teaching children to take turns and keep track of time.
- Use a timer in situations where there are fewer pieces of equipment than there are children who want to use them.
- When possible, agree on a reasonable amount of time for each general category of equipment that is fought over. For example, 5 minutes for the swing, 10 minutes for ping-pong, and 30 minutes for the video games.
- Write your family agreements down so that everyone is clear about the guidelines.
- When children see that they really do get their turn, they're much more willing to cooperate.

Timers are traditionally used for time outs when a child is sent to their room or put in a chair. This can be a good way for children to cool off and for parents to calm down. I suggest you think of ways to use the timer that's positive, and not just for timeouts.