Harvard Business Review | Digital Article

Negotiation Strategies

How to Negotiate...with Your Kids

Bring your boardroom skills to the living room. **by Mary (Molly) Kern and Terri R. Kurtzberg**

How to Negotiate...with Your Kids

Bring your boardroom skills to the living room. **by Mary (Molly) Kern and Terri R. Kurtzberg**

Published on HBR.org / May 29, 2020 / Reprint H05MY1

Westend61/Getty Images

You're going to negotiate with your kids today, probably multiple times. According to one informal survey of 2,000 parents, we negotiate with our children an average of six times a day (lasting about eight minutes each, or 24 hours a month). Imagine how much these numbers have escalated under the circumstances many now find themselves — working at home and being with their kids 24/7.

Unfortunately, according to this same survey, parents feel like most of these negotiations don't go well. In our experience as social scientists,

professors, and with our own kids — as well as through discussions with hundreds of parents while researching our book *Negotiating at Home: Essential Steps for Reaching Agreement with Your Kids* — we heard story after story of parents who were highly effective at the conference table but less so around the dinner table. One successful executive explained that he routinely received compliments on his negotiation skills at work, but at home he often found himself resorting to "Go ask your mother!" when faced with an irrational, short-sighted third-grader. When reminded that he often negotiated with irrational, short-sighted business clients, he was perplexed.

Stumbling in Negotiations at Home

Why does this happen to people who can execute high-stakes deals, who can persuade their colleagues to take new points of view, and who can handle conversations about raises and promotions with ease? Three challenges of negotiating with our children stand out:

- **Emotions.** Our kids reach for different tools than our colleagues — guilt-trips, meltdowns, playing one parent off the other — in no small part because they know they can't get fired, and neither can we! We also let ourselves act and react in more extreme ways than we would in the office. Successful negotiators at work know how to stay focused on the problem itself and not get sidetracked by interpersonal dynamics.
- **Repetition.** We engage in the same conversations — bedtime, screen time, meal time — again and again, and thus fall into patterns and ruts with the ways we respond. At work, negotiations are more contained and don't tend to have as much carry-over from one situation to the next.
- **Preparation.** Because they're unannounced, because they're with our kids, and because they're often over everyday things like chores and dessert, we don't tend to plan for these negotiations or prepare psychologically. At work, we can often anticipate a negotiation, and so do our due diligence and prepare ahead of time.

The problem isn't that professional negotiation skills don't apply at home — it's that we're not using them. In fact, bringing your professional expertise home can unlock unrealized value in your negotiations with your kids. Working parents especially need to get to "win-win" agreements, which are those that protect the main interests of both sides. Time and energy are precious, and these agreements solve immediate problems, prevent their recurrence, strengthen your relationships, and enhance your family time. Here are some strategies to reach them.

Know What You're Really Here to Accomplish

At work, we are generally clear with ourselves about what we want out of a situation and can keep our eyes on this overarching goal as a problem to be solved. At home, we get mired in specific positions and power struggles, which can distract us from being open to more productive solutions. Think of the parent who successfully compromised with her child about wearing a hat outside. *When my daughter didn't want to wear her hat and had that look on her face that told me she was prepared to go to the mat over this, I instead proposed a game of Little Red Riding Hood. I told her my own scarf would be the hood and that I would get to be the star, upon which she begged to wear it.*

Instead of either just giving in or engaging in a winner-take-all battle of "hat or no hat," the parent realized that her central interest was keeping the child's head warm. Knowing what's most important, and what you can or cannot live without in an agreement, will help you stay true to your "north star" instead of getting stuck on any one idea.

Ask Questions to Fill in the Gaps

Nobody knows your kids better than you do. This is tremendously useful for negotiations, but since we can never fully know what's going on with another person in any given moment, this also creates a blind-spot. *My child and I butted heads over a donut. He wanted the whole donut all at*

once, while I wanted to give him half first, and the second half if he still wanted it. It was ugly, and I finally gave in out of exasperation.

If we had a disagreement like this at work, we would likely ask the colleague why they cared so much about it, but the parent skipped this step. When he offered the donut in two halves, he failed to account for the value the child placed on being able to bite into a giant, whole donut. Had he asked for his child's perspective, it might have changed the interaction in tone at least, if not in behavior. Offering the chance to participate and explain his side would also have helped inspire a sense of fair play.

Use the Right Approach at the Right Time

Every executive knows that some battles don't need to be fought at all, some might be strategically postponed, and others just need a firm decision from the top-down. Parents similarly would benefit from choosing the right strategy for the right moment instead of engaging thoughtlessly. The same approach might land very differently as your kids grow up (or even based on whether they're too hungry at that moment!).

Decide when to disengage entirely (*I knew nothing good was going to come of continuing the conversation at that point, so I said we needed to table it until later.*) and when to spend the time trying to better grasp the situation. And while "Because I said so!" is the right answer sometimes, if used too often our kids start to tune it (and you) out. Explaining how decisions get made can greatly increase compliance and goodwill.

Present Ideas in Ways that Appeal

Effective managers know that it's not just what you say, but how you say it. Busy parents can minimize contentious back-and-forth by crafting their statements to pave the way towards acceptance.

Go first. Much of your conversation will consist of offers and counter-offers, so use these to signal your own interests and your insight into their interests. State offers early in the negotiation to anchor the rest of the conversation by setting expectations and orienting subsequent counter-offers. *Offering a 10 p.m. curfew usually means my son asks for 11 in response, and we settle on 10:30. If he got to go first, he'd ask for midnight and then we'd end up settling at 11!*

Embed choice. Instead of a single offer, two or three choices, framed in terms of their priorities, make it easier for your kids to say yes. Choice gives a sense of control over both the process and outcome. A parent ordering takeout mastered this technique: *I announced where we would be ordering from instead of opening the floor for debate, but allowed each child to choose a dish. This one small change sidestepped an ongoing moment of tension in our house.*

Highlight reference points. We consider offers not in isolation, but as compared to other alternatives. For example, an item on sale seems like a great deal in no small part because of the larger (original) price tag. This works because as compared to the "it could have been worse" option, the proposed option seems more palatable. *I told my teen that her actions could have resulted in a much more severe punishment, but that I would go easy on her and reduce it.*

Address fairness. "It's not fair!" is a common refrain, but kids' assumptions that fairness is based on everything being exactly equal can be overly-simplistic and limiting. While splitting the cookie between siblings right down the middle is generally a good practice, perhaps the four-year-old shouldn't get as much dessert as the teenager. Nor should the two kids split the last piece of cake in half if one prefers the icing and the other the cake. *In our house, we created a word — "unfaired" — to describe that feeling of injustice. When our kids use it,*

we can recognize that we understand why something might feel unfair to them, and then analyze why something might be fair even if it wasn't equal.

Don't do all the talking. Silence can be a powerful tool. It can both help you avoid making unilateral concessions (like increasing your offers prematurely) and gives your child a chance to contribute. *My son wanted to take the trolley back to the hotel after lunch, but I said I wanted to walk back, to take advantage of the nice day. Instead of immediately overruling him, I paused. He then suggested that we walk in the opposite direction to get in a longer walk and take a longer trolley ride back.*

Successful managers know how to prioritize their goals, ask good questions, and put offers on the table in ways that inspire creativity and generate agreements that both sides want to say yes to. These same skills can help working parents (especially with today's increased at-home hours) create positive outcomes with their kids to both help navigate difficult moments and model effective problem-solving skills. Your kids continue to grow, and so must your skillset. And by practicing with your entrenched, passionate, persistent toddlers and teens, your kids may even make you better at your job.

This article was originally published online on May 29, 2020.

Mary (Molly) Kern, Ph.D., is an organizational psychologist and Associate Professor of Management at Baruch College – City University of New York. Her research and teaching focus on negotiation processes and team dynamics aimed toward maximizing performance, and bounded ethicality to support ethical learners.

Terri R. Kurtzberg, PhD, is a professor of management and global business at Rutgers Business School. She is the author of five books and her research is frequently quoted in the media. Dr. Kurtzberg is the recipient of multiple teaching and research awards.

