



## The Crisis of Self-Affirmation: Understanding the Importance of “No”

Throughout the first three years of life, children go through four major developmental crises: birth, weaning, objectivisation, and self-affirmation. While each of these crises is a difficult time for both parents and children, each represents an important developmental step in the path to independence. When a child resolves these crises completely, he emerges with a basic trust in the world and in himself. Each crisis encompasses a separation between the child and caregiver; thus, it is important to find a new way to nurture and support the child throughout his development.

The crisis of self-affirmation, also referred to as the oppositional crisis, begins around 18 months and lasts until 2 ½ to 3 years. It represents a period of transition from infancy to childhood, and is often recognized in the child who begins to say “no.” Children at this age are growing and changing rapidly, gaining new motor and language abilities daily. The child begins to see himself as a capable, unique individual, fully separate from the mother. It is also during this time that he begins to develop impulse control, empathy, and an understanding that he is not the only person in the world with needs, wants, and desires. The use of the words “no” or “mine” represent the child’s gaining sense of power and control of his own person. In her book Understanding the Human Being, Dr. Silvana Montanaro notes that “behind the child’s ‘no’ is the desire to be recognized as a person who is already able to resolve many problems related to him...and to ask for his opinion much more often than is generally done.”

Parents can support their child through this challenging time in the following ways:

### **1) Set clear and consistent limits**

Toddlers are curious beings, constantly exploring every aspect of their environment. It is important to understand that when a child tests and retests limits he is trying to make sense of a complex world. When the adult gives in or is inconsistent, this is both confusing and frightening for the child; without clear limits, he feels abandoned. We can help by setting well-defined limits and holding our ground even in the face of a power struggle. Though it may seem as if the child wants to win the power struggle, what they are really seeking is confirmation that there is order in the world and that you mean what you say.

### **2) Offer choices**

Children at this age are constantly seeking an opportunity to assert their newly discovered power. If we do not provide a positive outlet for this they will create their own opportunities to engage in power struggles. Instead, we should provide the child

with many opportunities to have a voice. Giving a choice does not mean that the adult is giving up control. Rather, we offer the child a choice between two acceptable outcomes. For example, a child does not have a choice of whether or not to take a nap. He may, however, be given the choice of: reading a book or going straight to bed, what blanket he would like to sleep with, if he would like to listen to music, etc. Whatever two choices you offer can be consistently reiterated, but another choice should not be offered. For example, you might say, "Staying up is not a choice. Would you like to read a book first for go to bed? If you cannot choose I will help you make a choice." Once the child makes a choice they need to feel the consequences of the choice that they made and should not be allowed to change his mind. For example, you might give the choice of eggs or cereal for breakfast and the child chooses cereal, but then decides he wants eggs after the cereal is prepared. He should not be catered to, but rather should be gently reminded that he made a choice and will have another opportunity to make a different choice next time.

### **3) Don't engage in temper tantrums**

Temper tantrums begin with anger or frustration. The adult cannot buy into this, as young children are not reasoning human beings and cannot be talked out of the tantrum. The adult should offer comfort and be emotionally available to the child when he is ready. When a child is having a tantrum the adult should calmly give the child some space. The adult can tell the child, "I can see that you are not ready to talk to me. When you have calmed down we can talk about this." At that moment, the adult should walk away. During the discussion, once the child has calmed down, it is critical that the adult **never apologize** for setting the limit. Keep the discussion to the point; toddlers are unable to understand lengthy, rationalized discussions. You could say, "I could see you were very upset when I told you to not climb on the shelf. It is not safe to climb on shelves. Now would you like to help me wash the dishes or sweep?"

### **4) Remember that toddlers do not yet have a reasoning mind**

It is tempting to provide lengthy explanations for the limits we give children. However, toddlers are unable to rationalize at this age. In fact, children do not develop a reasoning mind until around six years old! They are more concerned with knowing what the expectations are than why the limits exist. The adult should also word the limit as a matter of fact instead of making it as if they are imposing their will on the child. For example, you might say, "chairs are for sitting" instead of "I don't want you to stand on that chair because I am worried that you might fall off the chair and bump your head on the table." It is easier for a child to wrap his head around a clear, simple idea that can be repeated again and again so that the child can understand that the limit is permanent and consistent.

Though this can be a trying time, adults must be willing to help children through this crisis. When a child is respected, given a voice, and provided with many opportunities to develop independence, he emerges a confident child, fully assured in his new abilities. If, however, the adult does not support the child through this crisis, the deviation will continue and can reemerge with a vengeance during adolescence. We must patiently and unwaveringly offer the child our love, support, and understanding, even through the most difficult times.