

## The Problems with Polite

by Linda M. Clement

originally published in *Peninsula News Review*  
September 28, 2005

Why is it that getting kids to do chores, help out around the house, and generally do what is asked of them, such a frustration for parents?

The problem word in the question is 'asked.' I hear parents every day asking their kids if they want to go home from the park now, if they want to go to bed now, if they want to clean their rooms now, if they want to do the dishes now, if they want to leave the mall now... The subversive teenager who still lives in me replies, 'well, obviously no.'

I used to play with people, when I was a teen-aged waitress. When they asked if they could have a cup of coffee, I often just said, 'no.' Sometimes, I was more helpful and would hint, 'I don't know, are you allowed?' I was 'taking orders' –but people so rarely actually give orders. They ask the waitress if they can... as in 'can I have a coffee?' 'Gee, I dunno, can you?'

People don't really mean 'it is up to the waitress if I can have a cup of coffee,' but it's how they ask for one. They are so uncomfortable about giving orders, because they associate the process with being a Nazi, a bully, or a sergeant-major that they paralyze themselves and have real difficulty

being firm.

Being firm does not preclude being polite. I can give orders (as in 'saying exactly what I want to have happen, in clear, active language') without being rude, abusive or authoritarian.

I can give orders that do not end in '?' without it ever being anything but respectful. I can be respectful of other people's time, energy, pace and mood without asking them to do what I want them to do.

### ...why is getting kids to do what is asked of them such a frustration for parents?

In our house, Janet's job is the laundry. When the underpant situation in my bedroom becomes critical, and my clothes are in the laundry room (her condition for laundry –she doesn't pick up and she doesn't deliver), I can do either of two things. I can request that she do some laundry, or I can tell her to do some laundry.

Oh, sure, there is also: think 'laundry' at her really loud in my head and get frustrated when she doesn't pick up the vibes; hint that I need underwear and hope that she gets that I mean she should do something about it; complain to other people or to her that I have no clean lingerie and assume she'll take that as direction, or even; bribe her to do something about my problem.

I say, 'Janet, I need clean

underwear. You need to do at least one load of laundry, please.'

Amazing... off she goes, puts a load of laundry in, and *voilà!*

Now, I didn't yell at her from the bottom of the stairs, I didn't interrupt her while she was talking on the phone and I didn't tell her to do it in the middle of her favourite tv show. I didn't nag, use sarcasm, complain or berate her for not already having done the task. I also didn't say 'right this second or bad things will happen to you,' nor did I mean that. I was, you see, polite.

'We need to leave the park now to go home and have lunch, so please put your shoes on.'

'You need to take the garbage out before the end of the commercial break.'

'Please pause your game for a moment so you can set the table.'

'It's bedtime.'

### No Question Marks Needed

No question marks necessary –ten times as likely to work, one-tenth the frustration value...

---

Linda Clement is a parenting coach, and writer of many things, working with Raising Parents Inc.  
lindaclement@raisingparents.net  
lindaclement.blogspot.ca  
www.raisingparents.net