

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Fulfilling a Child's Desire in Imagery

TEN MINUTES LATE on a Monday morning, and your child refuses to leave the house until you read one more story. To avoid a time-consuming power struggle, surprise him by saying you wish you could read him a whole pile of books right now. Ask, "How tall would a stack of 100 books be?" Indulging the wish in fantasy takes about 60 seconds. Faber and Mazlish suggest this technique as an instant mood changer in their bestselling book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. On a Monday, saying "I wish you didn't have to go to school too, then we could play the whole day" can miraculously lift a negative attitude. Aligning with a child's feelings provides its own levels of satisfaction.

Research shows that creating the exaggerated image of making a wish come true can actually fool the brain into the feeling as if its desire has been fulfilled. The classic example of the power of imagery affecting the brain is picturing a lemon in your mind and feeling your mouth pucker. This "picturing" of what we wanted is the basis of "guided imagery," a well-researched process used in many areas of physical and mental health.

Responding to discomfort

It's wintry cold on the morning yard, and a boy bundled in a coat says he's freezing and wants to go home. My first response is to think of ways to help him warm up—jumping, rubbing his hands together. He sticks with the story of going back to his house. Then I put myself in his place and say, "I wish you could be home too, lying in bed with lots of covers all around you, cozy and warm." His seems to instantly relax, and his complaining stops. Creating this kind of imagery can actually cut down our cortisol levels and leave us feeling calmer and maybe even warmer. To our rational minds, acknowledging how good it would feel to be home in bed would make him feel worse. Not so! Engaging in a nurturing fantasy together can bring comfort.

Avoiding arguments about eating

After eating lots of preschool snack, a five-year-old insisted she wanted "More, more, more!" "You won't have room for lunch," the teacher said with firm good cheer. The idea of not getting the food she desired stoked the fires of her determination, and she refused to move from the table. Overhearing the tension, I said, "I wish you could have a whole mountain of this snack," gesturing up to the ceiling. The girl suddenly burst out laughing. "How big would my stomach be?" she asked. "How would I walk?"

There are so many times that we legitimately need to say "No" or "Not now" to children. In their more "primitive" black-or-white thinking, they may feel like we are opposing them, and hearing the logical reasons why they can't do something doesn't change that perception. At first it may feel odd to try saying things like "I wish we could stay up for hours and play" or "magically arrive at home right now."

Yet this method, tested over decades, shows that investing in the harmony of the moment yields dividends of cooperation in the future.

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