

EXAMPLE ANSWERS --

Please don't read until you first try completing these answers on your own, so you get more out of this exercise.

GOING DEEPER

Setting Empathic Limits – What Will You Say and Do?

Read the situations below. Under each scenario, what could you say and do that would help your child to feel understood, and at the same time set the necessary limit?

1. Your child wants a cookie just before dinner.

Set the limit, offer empathic understanding, and use play and laughter to shift the mood.

What you say:

I'm rushing to get dinner on the table, and my child's whining makes me even more anxious. So first, I take a deep breath and remind myself that she's hungry and tired. Then, in a warm voice, I set the limit, using empathy: *"You must be so hungry! You need food right now for that hungry tummy! Tacos are almost ready. Cookie will come after tacos."*

If she whines again for a cookie, use play and laughter to help her accept the limit by shifting into a playful "cookie monster" voice:

"You cookie monster! You want cookie!"

"ME cookie monster! Me want cookie TOOooo! Where cookie? You cookie?"

I would come in close and engage my daughter playfully, joining her in a clownish search for cookies, sniffing around all over in search of them: under the chair, in a drawer, down the tops of her socks, and ending in playfully snuffling her too.

After a few moments pretending not to find cookies (even if she points them out) I would fling myself on the floor, kicking my feet and wailing for the cookies.

"My tummy crying for cookie! I'd do anything for cookie!"

Then in a concerned "Mama Cookie Monster" voice:

*"Oh you poor, hungry, starving little cookie monster! Time for dinner cookie!
Come eat taco cookie!"*

This acknowledges her feelings in a way that makes her feel understood but also helps her laugh, and speaks to the real need, rather than what she thinks she needs, in a nurturing way.

What you think and do:

Who doesn't want a cookie right before dinner sometimes? I know my daughter is hungry and tired at the end of the day, and would try to keep this interaction light, quick and playful, with the goal of helping my daughter transition to eating dinner ASAP.

Although this is a playful response, I am not just trying to distract her, but to ease the tension by getting her laughing. I would make sure she knows by my attitude that I'm not teasing her.

When "Mama Cookie" piped in, I would hop up and grab my daughter, cooing over her as I carried her to the table, and set her up with her dinner. Of course, everything we ate that night would be "cookies".

If my daughter asked for a real cookie again and I was okay with her having one for dessert, I would have "Mama" say something like *"First dinner cookie, then cookie cookie!"*

If I didn't want her to have a cookie that night, I would have "Mama" say (provocatively) *"Tonight dinner cookie! Tomorrow I eat all cookie cookies!"* When my daughter responded in outrage, I would goad her playfully: *"Okay, Okay! Tomorrow you eat ½ cookie at snack time, Me eat one and ½ cookies!"*, playing around briefly until we reached a concession of each eating a cookie at snack time.

2. Your child is standing up to look out the bus window.

Set the limit, offer empathic understanding, and use connection to motivate cooperation.

What you say:

First, ignore everyone around you who might be watching. Your only obligation is to your child. Then, in a warm voice, set your limit, using empathy: *"Bet you can see absolutely everything from way up there! But rules of the bus are that everyone sits so no one gets hurt."*

Then tell her what she CAN do: *"Do you want to sit here on my extra-super-duper-high-window-see-out-of-lap-seat and show me what you're seeing out there, or would you rather sit here next to me and tell me about it?"*

What you think and do:

I bet it's exciting for my child to look out the window of the bus! While keeping her safe, I want to help her enjoy the ride too. I also need to keep some of my attention on watching for our stop and navigating a public place, so if possible, I want to make a smooth transition.

I would move in close, sliding right behind her, and putting my hands on her waist to stabilize her as the bus moved. I would hold her there as I connected, and then ease her back onto my lap when I helped her transition to sitting in one seat or the other.

If she kept trying to stand back up, I would try using play and laughter to connect with her and keep her engaged, by (not TOO loudly) adapting a known song, like: *"Oh, the windows of the bus are up too high! Up too high! Up too high! Oh, the windows of the bus are up too high, all around the bus oh! Oh the seats of the bus are down too low!...."* (While pretending to crane my neck high, and then sinking down low in my seat.)

3. Your child ignores you when you ask him to start getting ready for school.

Set the limit, using playfulness to motivate cooperation.

What you say:

"Private Mama to Captain Sammy! Private Mama to Captain Sammy! Come in Captain Sammy!"

"Captain Sammy, sir, I hate to pull you away from that warm bed! But we have an emergency situation in the breakfast nook! Breakfast will be served in T-minus one minute - and there's a bowl of oatmeal and raisins on the tray with no one there to eat it! The family is in a panic - only someone brave and hungry (who likes oatmeal with raisins) will be able to eat it in time for us to get out the door in half an hour! But WHO, oh WHO likes raisins with their oatmeal?"

"Wait! YOU like oatmeal with raisins Captain Sammy?! Quickly! All hands on deck, Sir!" (Handing him his clothes...) "Into your uniform! You're the only one who can save us!!"

What you do:

My morning goal is to get the kids to school on time, and my husband and I to work on time. I want us to all head out the door with smiles on our faces, looking forward to seeing one another again in the afternoon... and this takes a bit of planning. I start by going to bed early enough that I'm rested the next morning. No facebook, no instagram at night. Then, I get up early enough that I'm rested and ready so I can focus on connecting with my family.

Finally, I get my child to bed early enough that he usually wakes up on his own in time for school. I know that if I have to wake him up, he didn't get enough sleep.

Still, I think that if he could, my son would stay in his warm bed every morning instead of going to school. He's slow to wake, and it takes a while some mornings for him to get up to full speed. I know I would be the same way without coffee! Since I can't give him coffee ☺, I have a weekday routine that takes this into account (early bedtime, longer "wake up period", picking out clothes the night before) and I'm prepared to use some playfulness and favorite games to engage him and move him through the program when needed.

In the game above, I would start calling while heading down the hall into my son's room, ending right near his bed at eye level. I would engage him with playful urgency, pulling back the covers and handing him his clothes to help him briskly over that big, painful obstacle of getting out of the warm bed in the morning and on to the day.

4. Your child forgets to do his chore.

Set the limit, offer empathic understanding, and use connection to motivate cooperation.

What you say:

In a warm voice, describe the situation without added judgment, and set the limit about what you need done, using empathy: *"I see your clean clothes are still in the basket. Looks like you've been so busy with your art project that you never got around to putting them away. Remember I need that basket for the next load? Come on, let's go and put those clothes away together."*

What you do:

My child would probably rather play than put away clothes, so I think he'll be more invested in chores at this age if I keep this interaction light and joyful. With practice, he'll be able to do chores consistently on his own, but for now I'm focusing on celebrating the contributions he makes on his own, and working together on regular daily and weekly tasks (like picking up his toys and putting away his clothes).

On our way up – especially if there was any resistance to doing it – I might invite him to make it a game: *"Hey, what do you want to play while we put the clothes away?"* If he didn't have any ideas I would offer some: *"Want to play 'Would You Rather' or pretend we're....?"*

(Does this seem like a lot of work to get your child to do their chore? Remember, you're trying to develop a habit. That will happen more quickly if your child begins to see the chore as quick, painless, maybe even an opportunity for connection and fun. Once the chore is a habit, simple reminders will work.)

5. Your child throws his cup in anger.

Set the limit, empathize and support the expression of emotion. Later, teach skills and appropriate behavior with laughter.

What you say:

First, I remind myself that my son is young, and frustrated. My kind response will help him learn self-regulation. "My goodness sweetie, you just threw your cup onto the floor! You're so upset. You really wanted to drink from that straw! I'm sorry that was so hard, but cups are not for throwing!"

What you do:

I would come close to my child with a soft, loving presence to connect and keep him safe; and to be ready to support him as he worked through his emotions.

If he was yelling or trying to throw other things, I would remove small objects within his reach and reiterate, *"You're so upset! ...Spoons are not for throwing either... I'm here to keep you safe."*

I would stay close, warm and compassionate to provide him with the space to cry if he could.

Later, I would help my child to gain competency with straws (starting with blowing bubbles!), since that's what started the throwing incident. I would also start playing with the idea of throwing – creating physical and goofy question games about what we can safely throw where (like pillows and socks and stuffed animals on the bed, and balls outside) and what we can't (like Mama's and refrigerators and elephants and light bulbs!)

6. Your child teases her sibling.

Set the limit and meet the need driving the behavior. Later, reassure directly with words and deeds.

What you say:

"Hey Zo, I know it's hard to see me carrying your brother in this pack. You remember when you fit in it, and you loved riding in it too! Maybe it feels bad to you to see him in it now...?"

"The rule in our family is that we use words to spread love, and that holds even if your brother may not fully understand your words yet."

Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course.....©2026 by Dr. Laura Markham.....Do not reproduce without permission

"But uh, oh....does that mean? Let me check your pulse...stick out your tongue...OH NO! Not that! How terrible! It's a very serious case! You're suffering from lack of kisses disease! And of course there is only one cure for that!....Your brother and I will save you! We'll kiss you all over!, Hey, where are you going? This is a very serious case! We'll save you! Come back!"

What you do:

I would address the teasing, and the energy behind it, even if the baby didn't fully understand the words his sister was using. Then, I would come close and remind my daughter of our family rule.

Then we would address the emotions driving her behavior by getting her laughing about how needy she feels. Which means theatrically check her all over for "symptoms", finding them everywhere, and diagnose a Lack of Kisses disease! Because this is such a serious condition, the baby and I would chase my daughter around in earnest, smacking our lips and trying to kiss her.

(Research shows that children often prefer hugs to kisses because adults are often more invasive with kisses, responding to their desire to "steal" a kiss rather than the child's need for connection. That's why I usually recommend "Are you out of hugs again?" But in this case, my goal is not just reassurance of my love, but also laughter, to help her with her fear about whether I love her as much as I did before the baby. I know my daughter finds the loud lip smacking funny, so I use that. But always tailor this to your unique child and their mood.)

Later, I would assure her that I would always have arms to hold her, and ears to hear her worries, and lips to cover her with my kisses again and again, whenever she needed them... and that I felt quite certain that her brother would too.

And I would step up the one-on-one time with her!

7. Your child refuses to wear her coat as you're leaving the house.

Rethink your limit. In this case, you decide it isn't a big deal and problem-solve instead.

What you say:

"You don't want to wear your coat right now? Okay, which one do you want to bring along in case you get cold later?"

What you do:

When kids are inside where it's warm, their frontal cortex is just not developed enough to project that they'll be cold once they're outside. Experiencing that is one way they grow their brain, so this is an opportunity for your child to learn something, as long as you don't turn it into a power struggle. A fight about someone else's body is not one you can ever win. So as long as I didn't think it was dangerous (like a wind chill below zero), I would let my child choose to wear her coat or not, or to choose one to throw in my backpack in case she needed it later.

If the child is indecisive or resistant to choosing, I would pretend to be one of the coats in the closet:

"Hey Julia, take me! I want to be the one who gets to keep you warm if you get cold today! Please take me! Please, please, please, please!!!"

If I had time, I might take the coat from the closet and pretend to chase her with it, trying to grab her with the arms and pleading to be taken: *"Hey, you're going to take me, aren't you? I can't wait to wrap my arms around you!!"*

If all else failed, and I was eager to get out the door, I would throw a coat in my bag and if she needed it later, offer it to her graciously (without saying *"I told you so!"*).

8. After you put your child to bed, he keeps getting out of bed.

Set the limit, offer empathic understanding, and empower the child with problem solving. Then, meet the need driving the behavior by helping him feel safe in bed (in this case, using playfulness).

What you say:

"Hard to stay in bed tonight kiddo? It's sleepy time. Come on, let's crawl into that bed and snuggle together for a couple minutes before we let Bed snuggle you to sleep!"

What you do:

It can be hard to deal with my child not settling to sleep when I get so little time to myself, and I have so much to do every evening before I can go to bed. BUT I also know that for my son, going to bed is a bit like being sent to Siberia. It's hard for children to face nighttime separation and solitude, and often as they start to relax toward sleep, any upsets from the day come up to plague them. My goal here would be to help my child feel safe, nurtured, connected and capable.

I would take my son by the hand and head back to bed. On the way, I would ask:

"Do you need to use the bathroom one last time before going to sleep?"

Then I would crawl into bed with him for a short cuddle and connection:

"You've been up a few times tonight, sweetie. What do you think would help you settle down to sleep?" I would wait a moment to see if he had any ideas.

If he didn't, I might try: "Do you need one last little wiggle?" or "Do you have anything on your mind you want to give me for safe-keeping—any thoughts or worries?" I would keep this brief.

Then, pretending to be the bed, "Yawn! I have something to...Yawn! ...say ...Yawn!"

"Oh Teddy! It's Bed...Of course! What is it Bed?"

As Bed: "I was having a little trouble relaxing tonight too! But I'm feeling all cozy and sleepy now! Teddy, will you please rest into my soft mattress arms and cuddle to sleep with me?"

Then I would say: "Oh Teddy, Bed is ready to sleep now too! Oh yes you two, now it's time for you both to sleep! Can I have one more hug and kiss before you cuddle together for the night?" And I would give both Bed and Teddy a hug and kiss.

As bed one last time: "Goodnight Mama! Teddy and I are going to sleep now - we'll keep each other safe and warm!"

As me: "Sleep so well you two sleepies you!"

9. Your child says that the dinner you've prepared is disgusting.

Empathize. Reconsider your limit. Use playfulness to connect. If that doesn't work, empower her to problem-solve. Later, do problem-solving for the future, and teach family values about respectful communication.

What you say:

First, notice that you feel hurt, and let that go so you can respond to the feelings under your child's hurtful remark. Start by empathizing: "You sound disappointed. I guess this isn't what you had in mind for dinner, huh?"

Often, that's enough to help your child articulate what she wishes she could have, and you can make an agreement to have that desired meal very soon. But if she's feeling tired and cranky, often her resistance won't be calmed by simple empathy.

In that case, you have a choice between a meltdown and playfulness. Since everyone is hungry and your goal is to get her fed, try playfulness. Shift into your best playful caricature of a witch: "Disgusting! E hee, hee, hee, hee! Yes, yes dearie! It is perfect, perrrrrfect! Perfectly disgusting!"

Invitingly (in a witchy way) while finishing and serving the meal: *"Double, double toil and trouble! Fire burn and cauldron bubble!! Do you want a plate or a bowl full little witch?"*

If needed: *"If you would prefer your own witches brew to mine tonight, you're welcome to use anything on the bottom shelf of the fridge - now skedaddle and catch yourself some newts! We eat in five minutes!"*

What you do:

Even though my feelings might be hurt by her remark, when my child speaks like this at dinnertime, I bet she's either hungry, or dealing with a backlog of emotions she may need help unloading. Either way, demanding at that moment that she speak more respectfully to me won't help her with her problem or to feel more respect. And while meltdowns are helpful in healing pent-up emotions, right now the more important goal is to get everyone fed.

Instead, I would approach this playfully, offering her the option of eating what I made and using play as the bridge. After all, she might just be tired and cranky, and she liked this meal last week.

If that doesn't work for her, I reconsider whether she actually needs to eat what I've cooked, and decide that as long as she eats a healthy dinner, I am fine with her making a meal of foods I keep at the ready for her in the fridge (fruits, cut-up veggies, tahini, nori, nut butter, etc.).

Later, I would check in with my daughter for updates to her preferences and tastes, and invite her to make some dishes with me - or on her own - for upcoming meals. Finally, I would remind her that she can express her needs without attacking me, and talk to her about how I would prefer to hear feedback about meals.

10. Your child hits her sibling.

Set the limit, create safety, offer understanding to both children. Later, empower the children with problem solving and teach repair.

What you say:

First, taking a deep breath as I move between the kids to prevent any further hitting and setting a verbal limit:

"Woah! No hitting! I'm right here to help."

Then, checking in with the child who was hit:

"Ouch! That looks like it hurt..."

Once that child is tended to, calming the child who hit:

"You must be so upset! I'm sorry sweetie! I'm not going to let you hit your brother. I'm here to help, and to keep both of you safe."

What you do:

I would move in close to create space and bring safety, and check first to make sure the child that was hit is okay.

Then, I would make it clear to my child that I would not let her hit her brother again, and that I was there to protect them both, and help them solve the problem that was causing so much frustration.

When my child calmed down a bit and was reconnected with me, I would empathize further:

"I know it's hard when your brother touches your babies, they're so special to you!"

"When he grabbed Rosie, you didn't know what to do, and you hit him..."

"That hurt your brother didn't it? He was crying."

Then, I would help her figure out what to do next time, to prevent future hitting:

"Next time your brother tries to grab one of your babies, what can you do?"

Finally, now that she feels both heard and empowered to protect her own toys, I would remind her that it hurt her brother when she hit him, and ask her what she might do now to "repair" her relationship with him.

Notice that in each of these cases, the first step is always to calm yourself so that you can stay understanding while you set the limit.

Notice also that in these examples, I usually begin with empathic limits, but quickly move into playfulness, which is a great way to sidestep a power struggle and gain cooperation. If the problem isn't just coming from temporary needs, such as the dinner example, then empowering the child by problem-solving is also very effective.

And of course, all of this sometimes fails, because laughter isn't enough to shift the emotions, and the child just needs a chance to cry. In that case, consider if you have the resources (time, energy, etc.) to support a meltdown. If not, distract, but make a date with yourself for a scheduled meltdown very soon.

If you can handle those big emotions at this time, then come in close and gently but firmly reiterate your limit: *"It's okay if you don't want to wear your jacket, but I am going to*

bring one in my bag to keep you safe and warm if you need it.” Stay close and warm while your child releases any pent-up emotions that have been driving their “unhappy” behavior. And then notice how your child changes, and becomes so much more affectionate and cooperative!