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Stop the Nagging: 7 Easy Steps to Break the Cycle

By Paige Trevor, PEP Certified Parent Educator



Nag (definition): 1. To annoy by constant scolding, complaining or urging. 2. To scold, complain find fault constantly.

We all know we should not nag, hate to be nagged ourselves and surely nag our children many, many, MANY times a day. Why do we do it, and what can we do instead of nagging?

Clinical psychologist and author of "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee" and "The Blessing of a B Minus," Wendy Mogel says, "We all know nagging doesn't work, but we are filled with hope. The paradox is that when you keep nagging you continue to fill your child with hope that he or she can continue to outsource the responsibility for whatever needs to get done to YOU [Mom or Dad]!"

Mogel goes on to say, "It's a tic and a habit. We are imagining a scenario that has never once happened in the history of parents and children." The dream looks like this: The parent will nag about the homework (or dirty towels or unwalked dog). The child will look up adoringly into the parent's face and say, "Thank you so much for elucidating me on this very important principal of accountability, especially considering the amount that you do for me!" Then the child will begin the homework (pick up the dirty towels or walk the dog). To parents, nagging feels like an insurance policy to protect our kids from ever suffering a C minus, a friend being mad or a forgotten baseball glove.

In reality, nagging erodes relationships. Kids enjoy (tolerate, hear) one nag. It shows we care, we love them and we notice what is going on in their life. With the second nag they hear, "I don't trust you. You are not capable. You cannot manage your own life or succeed without my backing you up." This is NOT the message we want to send. How do we instead send a message of love, faith and encouragement? Here's a seven-step action plan.

1. Apologize.

Meghan Leahy, a Washington, DC, parent coach, suggests starting by apologizing, "Wow, I'm really trying to control you guys. Nobody likes to be controlled - over and over and over." Then keep your mouth shut. If you have to, literally sit on your hands to remind yourself NOT to talk. The energy used in being silent is immense. Being quiet IS an action.

2. Notice Improvement.

Focus on the 85 percent of good or appropriate behavior, and see if it grows. Pay attention - did they turn in their homework more this week than they did last week? Comment on the turned-in homework only. Did they use some self-control when they were angry at their sibling after school? Say, "Hey, that made a more peaceful dinner time." Include yourself, too! How many times did you choose to keep your mouth shut instead of nagging? Notice improvement - yours, theirs and ours.

3. Give a Hug.

That's it. You'll all feel better.

4. Focus on Yourself.

Do an undesirable chore of your own - you know, clean out your closet, purge your recipes, do your budget, organize your taxes, call that relative, do a workout, edit your digital photos ... I could keep going - we *all* have enough to do on our own without adding everything our kids need to do.

5. Take Notes and Study.

Mogel says, "Note a couple of things. First, the things you nag about most often, the content and the topic. Take note of the time of day it's happening, the day of the week and what's been going on in the child's life." This will give you clues to see if the nagging is about stress, yours or theirs. It also gives you clues to the topics that really matter to you, which will then help you focus on finding creative ways to work on those issues, rather than engage in global nagging. Mogel adds that part of the "anti-nagging program is to make sure the kids have enough good stimulation, and it means you need to learn something about child development." The Gesell Institute books by Louise Bates Ames, et al., "Your One-Year-Old, Your Two-Year-Old," etc., through "Your Ten- to Fourteen-Year-Old" are a great place to start. Reading will both enlighten us and keep us busy so we don't nag.

6. Ask Questions and Listen.

Ask your child, "How often do you think you need to do laundry?" "When is the most productive time for you to do homework?" "Any tips you have for staying focused?" Questions are encouraging and relationship building. The speed bump we can expect is that, once we ask the question, we have to *listen* to the answer *without* commenting. Listening twice as much as we talk is a way to learn about and get closer to our kids. The more we know about our child, and the closer we are, the more influence (and cooperation) we can expect. The more cooperation, the less nagging. Magic.

7. Work on the Relationship.

More than likely, all of us have been deep down in the nagging hole. There we are at the bottom and the only tool we have is the shovel that got us there in the first place (nagging). It can be

lonely, dark and depressing down there. Not to fear - Meaghan Leahy is there to give us a tool, one that's been there all along. "The rope out is always the relationship with the child. It's there. Trust, confidence, goodwill, some boundaries."

I hope these actions will open up new, creative and encouraging ways for you to see and be with your beloved child. Leahy says, "You will have times of missteps with your child, but it's a dance and it's forever."

Paige Trevor is a certified parent educator with the Parent Encouragement Program. For more information about PEP's parenting classes, visit PEPparent.org or call 301-929-8824. (This article originally appeared in the June 2015 issue of Washington Parent Magazine. Photo credit: Jevna Cvorovoc/shutterstock.com)