



# Good-ginnings

*Guiding Young Children Through the Day-to-Day Challenges of Growing Up*

## Why Can't Kids Just Wait?

Waiting is a part of life. On a daily basis, adults find themselves having to wait—in checkout lines, in offices, in traffic. Adults have lots of experience waiting.

Young children, on the other hand, do not have much experience waiting. It takes time for them to learn why waiting is sometimes necessary and how to do it.

Every child, situation, and family is a little different. To teach a child to wait, think about the child's age, the situation, and the family's values and practices.

Joy has to go to the doctor for her 4-year-old shots. Joy's mother knows that it usually takes at least 15 minutes of waiting before they see the doctor. During her last visit to the doctor's office, Joy's mother spent most of the time trying to keep her from running around the waiting room and jumping on the couch. If Joy were your child, what would you do to teach her to wait more patiently?



## Surroundings and Situations



Another part of a child's ability to wait depends on the situation. Knowing the where, why, and what of waiting will help you teach your child good waiting behavior.

### *Where is the child waiting?*

Feelings of anxiety, boredom, and frustration often lead to clingy, whiny, rowdy, or restless behaviors. Knowing where waiting is likely to happen and how a child may react will better prepare you to help her deal with those feelings. Is the child waiting in . . .

. . . a hospital waiting room? The hospital waiting room might make a child anxious and scared.

. . . a hair salon while you're getting your hair cut? A hair salon may offer very little of interest to keep a child occupied while waiting.

. . . a stroller or cart while you're shopping? A child waiting in a stroller may become frustrated from being confined and from not being able to explore the interesting sights in the store.

Use distractions, activities, and your positive attention to lessen negative feelings about waiting. Children become better waiters when they have successful waiting experiences.

## Ages and Stages



Part of a child's ability to wait depends on his age. As age increases, so will a child's attention span.

Two-year-olds can remember instructions for about a minute, have a short attention span, and can be very active. In other words, 2-year-olds can't wait! To help them get through waiting, give them other things to do. Let them play with toys or make a space for them to jump or wiggle.

Three-year-olds' attention spans have improved, but it's still hard for them to wait. They want to please adults but still need lots of help. Provide activities to do while

waiting. Paper and crayons are fun at this age. Tell them what to expect and give them plenty of positive attention.

Four-year-olds' attention spans have increased. They also have an increased sense of independence and defiance. Offer them choices in activities. Let them know that you notice and appreciate their cooperation when they wait patiently.

Five-year-olds are usually able to wait for longer periods of time and to entertain themselves better. They have had more practice in exercising self-control and in concentrating. Still, plan ahead and prepare activities and distractions for long waiting periods.

## Why must the child wait?

Understanding why a child might have trouble waiting will not change the fact that he must wait. But seeing the situation from your child's point of view will help you explain to your child why he must wait. Is the child waiting . . .

. . . to play with the toy he selected because you still need to buy it? Young children do not understand the "rules" of adult society, such as having to give a toy to the cashier before you can play with it.

. . . to eat the birthday cake on the kitchen table? It's hard to understand that being polite is the reason you can't have a slice of cake before the party guests arrive.

. . . for his friend to come over? Young children get excited easily, and it's hard for them to understand the passage of time.

## What or who is available to help a child wait?

Are toys, books, crayons, games, or other activities on hand where the child will have to wait? Will there be other children to play with where you will be waiting? If not, plan to bring a few things to make waiting easier. Keep an "emergency waiting kit" on hand for unexpected or long waits.

## Family Values and Practices



Different families approach waiting differently. Some families may look at waiting as an opportunity to do something else interesting. Others may look at waiting as a waste of time and something to complain about. Some see waiting as a chance to show self-control and maturity. Others see waiting as time to enjoy spending with their child.

Part of learning how to wait happens by being around others as they wait.

What attitudes do family members or other caregivers show when they must wait? Are they calm? Angry and loud? Interested in what's going on around them? Grouchy? Cheerful?

What waiting skills do family members or other caregivers use to handle waiting? Do they read a book or magazine? Play cards or games? Chat with others? Listen to music?

What attitude do you want your child to learn about waiting? What kinds of waiting skills does your family value and reward?

## Teaching Tips



The best way to teach a young child to wait is to figure out what goes into making waiting easier for that particular child and then try to provide those things.

## Prepare the child.

Tell the child that you are going to a place where she will probably have to wait.

Let the child choose something to take to do while waiting. This gives the child some control over what she will be doing since she cannot control the waiting itself.

## Use distractions.

Bring books, crayons, paper, and other toys that the child can use to entertain himself while waiting.

Help your child think about something else. Play rhyming games. Make up a story together. Play a guessing game, such as "I spy a color." Describe yourself as a character from a favorite story and ask your child, "Who am I?"

## Make time more concrete.

Children have trouble waiting because they don't understand how time passes. A minute can seem as long as an hour. Give children some concrete aids to help them understand.

If you know how long something will take, set a kitchen timer and tell the child that time is up when it dings.

Make a clock with moveable hands and tell the child that when the real clock looks like this one, it will be time to go.

For long-term waiting, make a paper chain with one link equaling one day. The last link is what the child is waiting for.

Explain time in segments that the child understands. If the child knows about how long a television show is, you can say, "Your mom will be back in one hour. That's as long as two *Blue's Clues*."

## Avoid yelling or spanking to make a child wait.

Neither of these methods teaches a child to wait. In fact, either may teach her that waiting is awful!

Remember, happy, successful waiting experiences make a child think that she is good at waiting!

## Keep waiting periods as short as possible.

Try not to keep a child waiting for longer than 10 minutes without some very specific plans to make the waiting easier.

Remember that what you do teaches children how to act more powerfully than what you say. Are you a patient waiter? Are you prepared to wait when the need arises?



Remember Joy? Joy's mother told her that they had to go to the doctor's office and that they would probably have to wait. She helped Joy choose some toys to play with and packed them in a small bag to take with her. When Joy played with the toys at the doctor's office, Joy's mother gave her a big hug and thanked her for waiting so nicely.



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