

Case study: 'Do it NOW'

What to do when children don't do what you want them to do

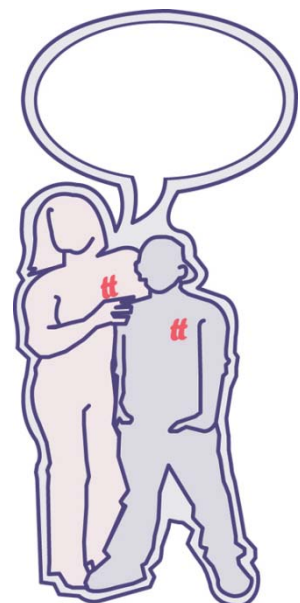
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When you're tired and just want to go to bed, the last thing you want is a set-to with a teenager who isn't doing what you'd like them to do.

How do you handle the situation?

Focus points

- Making agreements
 - commitment v compliance
 - requests v demands
- What to do when agreements aren't kept
- The 'violence' of insistence
- Use and misuse of power





The cautionary tale

The agreement was that Little Sister would wash the dishes and Big Sister would dry them. But Big Sister got engrossed in computer games - again. Repeated reminders went unheeded. Adult ran out of patience and switched off the computer mid-game. 'Do the drying up NOW please.'

Grudgingly, Big Sister completed her task - in silence. She went upstairs to bed - in silence. It wasn't until mid-afternoon the following day that she emerged - in silence.

She suffered. The family suffered. They all paid a price for compliance.

We all make mistakes

I have a confession to make. The cautionary tale is indeed true. I was the adult. The two sisters were the daughters of my late husband. And it all happened more than 20 years ago, before I had ever heard of Nonviolent Communication.

So what was happening? How did I let things slide into a confrontation with consequences that affected all of us? More importantly, what would I do differently now?

The mindset

My inner thoughts were:

- 'Not again!'
- 'This isn't fair – Little Sister has done her share so Big sister should too.'
- 'She should do as she's told.'

So I was influenced by:

- past incidents
- ideas about what **should** happen.

As a result:

- I got very cross and impatient
- I used my power as an adult without respect for the young person
- I insisted that the drying up be done at the time I chose.

Yes, the drying up got done – but at a price. Nonviolent Communication has shown me a very different approach.

Rewinding the tape

1. The agreement

'Sharing the washing up and drying' was my choice of task.

The two sisters accepted it at the time but had no commitment to it. So when something more gripping came up Big Sister got diverted.



In making the agreement, I thought that my need was to get the washing up and drying taken care of. But that was just my chosen strategy for inviting a contribution to our mutual ease in living together.

I predict that there would have been more buy-in if I had:

- expressed my real needs clearly
- discussed with the two sisters the contribution that they would enjoy making
- reached an agreement jointly.

*For more information about agreements and what to do if they're not kept, see **Agreements**.*

2. Request or demand?

Big Sister continued playing her computer game. I interpreted this as saying 'No, I'm not going to do the drying up' and eventually turned off the computer. Clearly, I was making a demand – and this would not have been fun for her to obey.

If I had been truly making a request, I would have been open to discussion rather than insisting on obedience.

*For more information about requests see **How to make requests**.*

3. The violence of insistence and the use of power

Was Big Sister really refusing to do the drying up? Or was she actually saying 'Not yet'? Would she eventually have finished her game and then done the dishes? I didn't wait to find out. I imposed my will on her, using my authority as an adult.

*For more information about power, see '**How to use power with respect**'.*

4. What to do when agreements don't hold

Just suppose I had said nothing and that when Big Sister finished her game she went straight to bed.

On the face of it, it would be a vindication of my irritation. I might tell myself 'I knew that would happen' – and tackle it with even more irritation the next day. But that would make the relationship worse and store up problems for the future.

A less violent strategy would be to:

- tune into my own needs and be clear about which of them had not been met
- think about the needs that Big Sister might have been meeting
- choose a quiet time to talk to Big Sister
- check out what, if anything, had prevented her from keeping her agreement (NB Empathising with her strategy does not mean accepting it.)
- express, if necessary, the needs of mine that hadn't been met
- invite her to explore ways of avoiding the same thing happening again.



Summary

Initial agreement

When you are making the initial agreement:

- identify the needs you want to meet and express them clearly
- keep an open mind as to how those needs could be met. Being attached to particular outcomes will limit your ability to hear the other person

In the moment

When you believe that an agreement is not being met, you have a choice about how you deal with it. A nonviolent strategy is outline below.

1. *Notice your inner dialogue and translate it into needs*
2. *Remind yourself that whatever anyone does is done to meet needs – so be prepared to explore what was going on for the young person. They might be trying to tell you something!*
3. *Choose a time when you are most likely to have the young person's attention.*
4. *Describe in non-judgmental terms what you observed. Make an empathic guess (if you can) about the needs the young person was meeting. Listen to the response! Continue to empathise and listen until the young person indicates that they have been heard to their satisfaction. (Be prepared for all sorts of other grievances to emerge.)*
5. *Describe your own feelings and needs.*
6. *Invite a discussion of how to move forward.*

Conflict usually arises because we become attached to our own particular strategy.

Stepping back and identifying the underlying needs can have a powerful releasing effect.

Exploring each other's needs helps to build relationships based on respect, empathy and mutual consideration.