

Let's say 'No to treats!'



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You want your children to grow up to be healthy adults, but sometimes it is hard to do what's best. A lot of parents tell us that saying no to treats, in particular, is a challenge.

Treats are everywhere, and for you as a parent, it is often easier to give in for a variety of reasons:

- It can be difficult to deal with our child's negative reaction
- Anything for a bit of peace and quiet
- You are often exhausted
- If you're honest, you are eating them yourselves too

Whatever your reasons, it's time to start thinking about making changes. About a fifth of the calories a child eats come from treat foods. We need to go back to really treating treat foods as 'treats'. This guide will help you start saying no to treats more often.



1 Learning to say no

10 tips for getting started

1. Think of this as a long-term solution rather than a quick fix
2. Decide on your family's goal – use our [treats diary](#) to see how many treats your children eat and then decide where you would like to be
3. Start gradually and don't make too many strict rules at once. Cut down on treat foods, but don't ban them as this only makes them more appealing
4. Let your child know what the limits are – how often and how much, and explain why you are making these new rules
5. Be firm and stick to the limits as best as you can
6. Avoid having fatty and sugary snack foods or drinks freely available
7. Say no in the supermarket – If they're not in the house, they can't be eaten
8. Tell your family and friends that you're making changes so they know about the new routine
9. Practise what you preach. Children are more likely to learn from how you behave rather than from what you tell them. If your child sees you eating an apple as a snack and enjoying it, they will be tempted to try one
10. Incentivise your children to make the changes using non-food rewards. For younger children, our [treats reward chart](#) might help

Good parenting is about achieving a balance between supporting and encouraging children to make decisions for themselves and setting rules and making decisions for them. You have to take responsibility for what your children eat. This is not easy. It can be a struggle, but a firm 'no' or 'not today' to appeals for snacks and fast food may go down easier than you think. They may not be happy about it at the beginning, but remember it's better for them in the long run.

When dealing with requests for treat foods:

- ✓ Be firm but fair, consistent and calm
- ✓ Use informative tones. Try to say no without getting cross
- ✓ Use positive language, e.g. 'have a banana' instead of 'you can't have crisps'. Focus on the behaviour you want rather than what you don't want them to do
- ✓ If they say they are hungry between mealtimes, offer them something nutritious like fruit, yoghurt or popcorn

2 Sticky situations

Parents have told us about situations they find particularly difficult. The advice here might help.



“I would like to encourage my children to eat less treat foods but how can I say no when these foods are everywhere?”

Having clear rules for what is and is not allowed can be a big help. It's true that treat foods are everywhere, at tills in the local shop, in garages and in vending machines in sports halls. This makes it difficult for you to say no.

- ✓ Have clear rules on when children are allowed to have treat foods – how often and how much (e.g. Fridays or at the weekend) and stick with it. If they ask for treats on any other day, be firm and remind them that treats are only allowed on certain days

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- ✓ Try to have healthier alternative snacks with you for when they get hungry out and about (popcorn, nuts or fruit, for example)

“I usually bribe my children with treat foods to get them to behave. How do I stop that now?”

Generally bribery occurs under duress and happens quickly when you want to change your child's behaviour on the spot. The problem with using food/snacks as a bribe is that it can lead your child to expect something extra for simply completing their daily tasks. It can also teach your child that they should continue a pattern of bad behaviour to get what they want.

In contrast, effective rewards compensate your children for good behaviour. There is nothing wrong with this if done right (not excessively and not with treat foods all the time).

Have a list of rewards done up, so that when your child behaves, they know what the reward may be. Make a list of incentives your child can earn on a short-term basis, in addition to 'big ticket' items they can achieve over time. Get creative – it doesn't have to be food all the time! Try to get your child to participate in the creation of this list.

- ✓ Praise them for good behaviour and offer them non-treat rewards like a game of football, a trip to the playground, disco-dancing at home, special time with parents in the evening, an extra bedtime story, choosing a DVD at the weekend
- ✓ Never bribe your children with treat foods in order to encourage them to eat healthy foods (e.g. don't say: 'you won't get any sweets until you finish your vegetables.'). This can give them the message that healthy foods are not enjoyable but must be endured to get unhealthy rewards
- ✓ Kids love a challenge – setting them a task is a great way to get them to change their habits. For example, download our [reward chart](#) and place a star in the food boxes for each day that their goals are achieved

“Most of my friends, family and neighbours give their children treats every day. How can I say no?”

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Some of us struggle to say no because of other people's opinions or pressure from friends, family or society in general. You might not want to stand out or want your children to stand out as different. But your family's food habits could damage their health in the long term. Your family's health comes first.

No one knows your values or your child better than you do. Try to remind yourself of this when you're feeling outside pressure. Keep focused on the big picture and, remember, no matter the reason, giving in is a quick-fix that can lead to problems later on.

- ✓ In the long run it's kinder to say no – don't be afraid to say it
- ✓ Tell the people around you about your routine for treat foods, especially those who care for your children, like grandparents or child minders. Ask them to support you in making changes

“Saying no is just going to lead to endless rows. How can I overcome this?”

When you do say no, give your child a good reason and offer an alternative. It is important to sit down with your child and explain the new routine to them. They must buy into the routine and feel it is a good idea and that there is something in it for them. They must also feel they have some control and some choice.

For example, your child might want a treat every day after school. You can start by letting them know that from now on, they can have a treat on one weekday and at the weekend. Maybe let them choose which weekday so they feel they have a little control over the issue.

- ✓ Involve your child in planning and deciding on changes – they are more likely to keep it up if they have helped plan it
- ✓ Give children a choice even when you are imposing a rule or limit. You may insist that your children only have treats at the weekend but let them choose between healthy snack options during the week and, within reason, which treats they would like to have
- ✓ Be on the lookout for good behaviour and give your children lots of positive attention and encouragement when they obey the rules

“My child is an expert negotiator and I just don't have the energy for it. How can I say no?”

'Over negotiating' is another trap parents fall into. This teaches your child that manipulative behaviour works. It feeds the behaviour, so that it continues or even gets worse. Secondly, over negotiating teaches your child that boundaries and limits are not solid. When you say no, you should mean no. If you don't mean what you say, you're not going to be seen as an authority figure. This can be hard, but if you have a few clear rules, it helps you and your children.

- ✓ Remind your child of your routine on treats and the reasons for it
- ✓ State clearly that the rules are non-negotiable but that your child can look forward to having their treat foods on the designated day(s).

“My children know exactly what to do or who to ask to get their way. How do I deal with this?”

Some kids start cleaning the house and making you breakfast. Others cry and sob and stick the 'you don't love me' dagger into your heart. However your child tries to manipulate you, it's important that you don't take the bait and that you recognise it for what it is. Yes, it's horrible to feel guilty but it's not worth sacrificing your authority to ease your guilt. Remind yourself that effective parents set appropriate limits and that saying no as a parent is part of the job description.

- ✓ Observe your child's behaviour and start to better understand the tactics
- ✓ Stay calm and stick with your word. Consistency is everything

“Sometimes I give in to them because I'm worried they are going to throw a tantrum. I know I shouldn't be doing this but how can I say no?”

When your child is throwing a tantrum, instead of panicking and responding immediately to avoid the tantrum, you should pause and think about what is going on. Pausing allows you to stay calm and in control so you can choose a constructive response to your child's tantrum. For example, if your child is

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asking for sweets and throwing a tantrum in the supermarket, rather than getting angry or feeling embarrassed and giving in, calmly explain why they can't have sweets (not until the weekend) and stick to the rules that you have discussed with them beforehand.

It is also useful to have a discipline plan (how you respond when children misbehave) and a prevention plan (how to stop tantrums happening in the first place) when dealing with tantrums.

- ✓ Try to stay calm
- ✓ Try not to get frustrated or angry with your child. It's easy to give in to your child's demands because you feel guilty for getting angry at them.
- ✓ Think of situations when your child is most likely to throw a tantrum or act out. Take some time to think through your response and find more constructive ways of responding.

“I find saying no really tough and just get stressed and frustrated.”

Saying no can be tough and you may feel stressed or frustrated, so it's important that you take time and do something that will help you deal with these feelings. For example, you might call a friend. No matter how you cope, make sure to stick with your decision. It is important to be consistent.

Positive self-talk is also helpful. If you have negative thoughts about the situation or are being hard on yourself, it will be more difficult for you to follow through with the limits you have set. Instead, focus on being strong and positive.

3 What other parents do

“Children are not allowed to take snacks from the cupboard themselves. They have to ask for it and I decide if they can have one.”

“I tell them you're not getting it...end of discussion...and they don't ask for it anymore...you have to be firm.”

“They get snacks and unhealthy foods everywhere (friends, grandparents, neighbours)...the one place you as a parent can have total control is the house.”

“I give mine a choice of money for small sweets now or they can save it for loom bands at the weekend...and I stick with the consequences so if one goes for sweets and one saves the money...only one is getting bands at the weekend...of course now they almost always save it.”

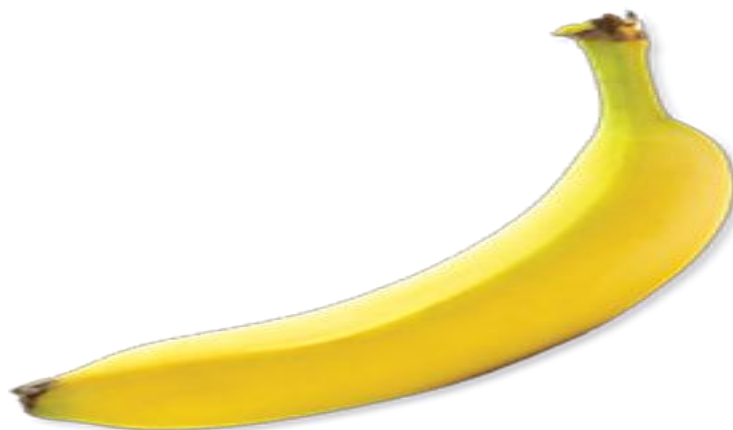
“Whenever you are challenged with a request saying ‘can I have’ whatever, have an alternative you can offer them.”

“Alternatives can be anything. They’re always looking for something or they always NEED something as they put it...so use that. So whenever they say, ‘I need more loom bands or a new

game, I say well if you're good for x amount of time you can get it, or you can save your weekly treat money for that."

In Summary, this guide recommends that you:

- ✓ Offer alternatives and make your children feel like they're choosing
- ✓ Don't buy treats so they are not in the house
- ✓ Defer or delay giving it to them (not until you clean your room or not until Friday)
- ✓ Only give it to them as rewards for good behaviour
- ✓ Give them smaller portions (half a bag of crisps in a bowl rather than a whole portion out of the pack)
- ✓ Have defined treat days/times, for example, only on Fridays or at the weekend or only after their activity or after school
- ✓ Make sure you follow through
- ✓ Keep at it and don't give in
- ✓ Be consistent



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