

Give up nagging your kids for Lent

At our house, school mornings are nutso. We parents drag our sad, sleepy bodies out of bed at 6 a.m., rouse the kids at 6:15, and aim to get five kids (including one in a wheelchair) dressed and fed and ready to go by 7 a.m.

How do we do it? Well, depending on the day and the mood we wake up in, we might take one of two approaches.

The first approach might be best described as The Angel of Death Cometh and Thou Better Be Prepared Or Else. You know when we're in that mode because it's pretty noisy: lots and lots of parental chatter, mostly in the form of repeated instructions that tend to escalate from reasonable reminders to Drill Sergeant/Angel of Death mode. In other words, this approach is characterized by a lot of nagging.

The second approach could be dubbed If Gandhi Had Been a Trappist Monk, because it's remarkably calm and quiet—but a strong quiet, not a sleepy quiet. No repeated instructions, no raised voices, no nagging.

I won't claim that we are 100 percent a Gandhi the Trappist Monk family yet (because our kids would rat us out), but we have way fewer Angel of Death mornings than we did years ago, thanks to some very intentional practice.

And that's a good thing, because nagging is unpleasant for everyone. It raises stress levels, sets a bad tone for the day, and wastes precious parental energy on what is ultimately a really ineffective strategy. Nagging might seem effective—it's an easier place to go to, and it might seem like it works—but in reality, it teaches kids to tune you out until they hear the "cue" that tells them that *now* you're really serious. Worse, your kids might learn that if they

ignore you long enough, you're gonna give up and go away, or do it for them.

Without meaning to be prescriptive here, or to suggest that we're going to cover every angle of the issue, here's a way to begin practicing the good habit of not nagging this Lent. I call it the 4 C's.

Connect with your kids.

Do you issue "drive by" orders—you know, shouting requests from the other room, or while you're absorbed in something else (like your phone)? Do make requests while your kids are distracted?

Especially when you're first trying to break the habit of nagging, be very intentional about connecting with your kids. Stop what you're doing, go to your kid, and make sure each of you has the other's full attention.

Cue.

Develop a word, phrase, or look that cues your child to the fact that this is more than an optional, casual request. Raise your eyebrows, clasp your hands together, do a dance, or preface your request with simple words: "Belle, this is important. I want you to" Some parents do a countdown: "One . . . two . . . three" Whatever you choose, use it consistently so that your child learns that it's connected with consequences that matter.

Communicate clearly.

When you communicate your request, be clear and specific. "Brett, I need you to be in the car with your boots on in five minutes. That's when the big hand is on the six."

With some kids, you might ask for an echo: "Can you tell me what I just asked you to do?"

Consequences .

If your child doesn't follow through within a reasonable amount of time, don't repeat your request—*not even once*. Calmly and quietly execute a consequence that is meaningful to your child; natural consequences work best, if you can make them work.

At our house, if older children (five and up) don't put on their boots as requested before it's time to leave the house in the winter, they may find themselves holding my hand as they walk barefoot to the car. I carry their boots in the other hand. Teens who aren't ready to leave on time may find themselves walking to school.

You don't need to offer any commentary to accompany these consequences ("I warned you . . . blah, blah, blah!"), nor do you need to waste energy raising your voice; in fact, you can even be genuinely sympathetic: "I'm sorry your feet are cold, honey—we're almost to the car, then you can put on your socks and boots."

What if the consequence doesn't seem to matter to the kid? Well, at that point you have two choices. Your first option is to evaluate whether the consequence might not just be an acceptable option. Most days, it's okay if my teens walk to school—it wakes them up and gets them exercising. Most of the time, my seven-year-old isn't going to get hypothermia if he goes out to the car without his winter coat. If he can handle being cold, does it matter? If he needs the coat for school, I might just throw it in the car.

Your second option is to ramp up the consequence until it actually matters. If your children won't clean up their toys, you might need to clean them up—with a trash bag that goes into storage for a while.

One more “C”: Contemplation

Not to make it an afterthought, but a solid parental prayer life—including time for contemplation, meditation, and self-examination—goes a long way to helping break bad (but oh so easy!) habits like nagging. If there’s not time for contemplative prayer, this one is a great start: “God, obviously I don’t have the physical or mental resources that I need to be my best parenting self today; could you supply my want by sending some strengthening grace my way, please? Thanks!”

Is this a sure-fire fix for habitual parental nagging, or kids who have learned to ignore their parents? Nope. But in my experience, it gets us 80 to 90 percent there . . . and that means more Gandhi the Trappist Monk days and fewer Angel of Death Drill Sergeant days.