



by Karen Stephens

# Whining: Responding When Pleading Children Grate On Your Nerves

At the first mention of whining, parents can tune into the sound. They can mimic kids with uncanny accuracy, too.

*There's the question whine:* "Why?" "How come?" "When?" "Why not?" *There's the whine for justice:* "It's not fair." "I want to." "But I just started." "You let Tommy do it." *There's the helpless whine:* "I can't." "Help me." "I tried." "You do it." "It's too hard." "I don't want to." *And there's the desperate bargain whine:* "Pleasssse, I promise I'll (fill in the blank) if you let me." Or, "You're not a good mommy (or daddy) if you don't let me."

Whining is a communication strategy all kids experiment with during one phase or another. It often peaks for two through four year olds, but can last longer.

A child whining is downright annoying. It's especially embarrassing in public or in front of relatives whom we fear judge parenting by our child's peevish pitch and persistence.

How parents respond to children's whining influences how long children stick with the tactic. When responded to with consistent, firm, clear guidance, children eventually give up whining for a more constructive, respectful communication style.

## Why Children Whine

There are varying causes for whining. Hungry, thirsty, tired, over-scheduled, overly-hurried, frequently ignored, or ill children are more prone to whining.

Some whine because they don't feel they get enough attention (and sometimes they're right). In spite of a parent's negative reactions, those children think any attention is better than no attention at all.

Some children whine because they hold a grudge about something they're angry or fearful about. They whine because they can't yet identify or express their feelings effectively. This happens with changes in family harmony or routine. Children jealous of a new infant sibling — or a new step-sibling — may whine out of confusion, jealousy, or frustration. The same is true if parents fight, separate, or divorce.

Sometimes children whine because our reaction reveals that it's an easy way to push our stress buttons. If a child feels helpless or powerless, sometimes pushing our buttons is all they can do.

## Responses to Avoid

Before I cite productive responses to whining, let me cite what doesn't work:

- Resist over-reacting emotionally and verbally to whining. A parent's outburst leads children to think that whining gets immediate and undivided attention.
- Avoid making "knee-jerk" threats, such as, "Keep that whining up and I'll give you something to whine about." Vague threats escalate anxiety and just aren't effective.

Whining is a communication strategy all kids experiment with during one phase or another.

- Mimicking a child's whining doesn't work either. I've seen children laugh at parents.
- Avoid bribery, such as offering candy or a trip to a favorite fast food restaurant. This merely teaches children how to manipulate with whining to get treats.
- Don't give in to guilt or insecurity. You have the right to compliance without whining. Hold your ground if children play on your emotions by whining that they like the other parent better. You aren't trying for a parent-of-the-year award.

### Responses to Try

- Be a good role model for identifying and expressing wishes and feelings. If you whine to get what you want from partners, spouses, kids' grandparents, or bosses, you're not giving children a good role model.
- Give your child individual attention and engaged interaction daily so there's no doubt you love them.
- Prevent problems with sensible, well-paced, predictable schedules for eating, sleeping, play, family time and home upkeep.

When responded to with consistent, firm, clear guidance, children eventually give up whining for a more constructive, respectful communication style.

- Anticipate problems. In case errands run late, carry along a snack and juice. If an event becomes over-stimulating, cut a visit short.
- Head off problems. Does your child begin to whine whenever you get on the phone or when company visits? Make a toy kit that can only be used during those times to limit whining bids for attention.
- When whining really grates on your nerves, remain calm. Take a deep breath and maintain composure. Don't let your stress button show.
- Honestly talk to your child about your responses to whining. "When you whine, it makes me nervous. Use your calm voice to talk to me." Or, "I don't like it when you whine when I say its dinner time. It helps when you come to the table cooperatively."
- Provide vocabulary that will help your child communicate better. Specifically teach children effective ways to ask for things: "I'll get your toy if you say, 'Please, will you give me that ball?'"
- Help your child identify the difference between a whine and a regular tone. As your child realizes when he/she whines, self-control over whining increases.
- Suggest alternatives to attention whining by modeling appropriate phrasing, such as: "Another way to get my attention is to quietly tell me how you feel. Explain to me what is bothering you. You don't have to whine in a high-pitched voice. Use your regular voice. Talk so it's easier for me to listen."
- Redirect behavior: "You can whine in your room or you can stay here and tell me clearly what you want. You decide."
- Offer choices. If a child whines about toys, matter-of-factly say, "You may play with modeling clay or toy cars. Which do you chose?"

If followed consistently, those responses will gradually reduce whining. As whining decreases, thank your child and specifically notice whine-free communications. Remember to praise the positive regularly.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.