

## Making and Breaking Promises

*by Kathy Slattengren*

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"But you promised!" It's easy to misinterpret a statement as a promise when no promise was intended. Being intentional about what is a promise and what is not can be helpful in avoiding misunderstandings. When you make a promise, it is important to follow through with whatever you promised.

I attended a seminar recently where the leader asked us to think back to a situation from our childhood where someone broke a promise to us. Each of us was able to vividly remember a situation; it was amazing how much emotion was still attached to these incidents so many years later.

One 50-year-old woman recalled being at a pool and being afraid of going down the slide. Her dad was in the water and promised her that he would catch her. However, when she came sliding down, he didn't catch her. She popped right up after being under water and reasoned that her dad probably just wanted her to learn that she could do it. She clearly remembers that broken promise and her feelings of being deceived.



I remembered being promised by my friend's aunt to be driven up to a lake cabin where my friend was spending a couple weeks in the summer. The aunt cancelled the trip the day before we were supposed to leave; I was crushed.

### Using Promises Instead of Threats

One mom was exasperated with her preschool daughter after she pitched fit for 45 minutes upon learning that her little brother was going swimming while she was at preschool. When mom was completely fed up with the whining and crying, she threatened to let her daughter sit in her room all day missing both preschool and a dance class. Her daughter stopped crying and got ready for school.

In this case, the threat got the girl to stop her tantrum. But what if she would have continued the tantrum? Does mom really want her daughter to have the choice of skipping school? Probably not.

The problem with threats is that we often make them when we are angry and therefore threaten things that we really don't want carry through on. Instead of using a threat, mom could have used a promise when her daughter started protesting like "I'll be happy to take you swimming next week if I don't use up that energy listening to you whining and crying."

The benefits of this promise over the previous threat:

- The daughter goes to preschool regardless of whether or not she continues to whine and cry.
- Mom can take son swimming as originally planned.
- If the daughter stops her whining and crying, she receives the positive benefit of going swimming at a later date.

Carrying through on promises feels better too!

## **Building Trust**

We want our children to be able to trust that we will follow through on what we say. Therefore, we want to avoid threats made in anger since those threats tend to be extreme and not well thought out.

It is far better to choose promises we'd be happy to fulfill rather than angry threats that will deteriorate our relationship with our children. When we keep our promises, our children learn to trust our word.

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