Making and Breaking Promises to Kids

By Kathy Slattengren, M. Ed., Priceless Parenting

Has your child ever accusingly said, "But you promised!"? Did you break a promise or did your child 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. Once you make a promise, it is important to follow through with whatever you promised.

Remembering Broken Promises

People remember broken promises for years, especially if it was an emotional event. Often remembering the situation even triggers some of those original emotions.

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 just wanted her to learn that she could do it. Years later, she clearly remembers that broken promise and her feelings of being deceived.

I remember as a teen 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.

Recovering From a Broken Promise

What do you do when you've broken a promise to your child and now your child is upset? Rick explained that he had promised his 12-year-old son that he would play a game of cribbage with him that night. However, time slipped by and it was time for bed before they got to play the game.

When his son realized they weren't going to be able to play the game that night, he was angry. Rick acknowledged his feelings and apologized. "I can see you are angry that we don't have time to play cribbage tonight. I'm sorry I didn't realize how late it was. Let's set an alarm to go off tomorrow night at 7:00 so that we remember to play the game then."

Acknowledging his feelings and apologizing calmed his son down. His reaction would have been different had Rick said "You're getting upset for nothing! I'll play cribbage with you tomorrow night." He probably would have gotten even more upset because his dad would have not only broken his promise but also dismissed his feelings.

Using Promises Instead of Threats

Julie was exasperated with her preschool daughter after she pitched a fit for 45 minutes upon learning that her little brother was going swimming while she was at preschool. When Julie 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 Julie 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, Julie could have used a promise when her daughter started protesting. She might have explained “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 she continues to whine and cry.
- Mom can take son swimming as 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**

You want your children to be able to trust that you will follow through on what you say. Therefore, you 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 you’d be happy to fulfill rather than angry threats that will deteriorate your relationship with your children. When you keep your promises, your children learn to trust your word.


*This article is available to be reprinted or republished free of charge courtesy of Priceless Parenting on the condition that the byline, article text and hyperlinks are not altered.* © Priceless Parenting, LLC