

The Deviousness of “Have To”

“Have to” is one of those phrases that I only began thinking critically about when we travelled further along our unschooling journey. A major theme in radical unschooling is the removal of rules and obligations, and replaced with principles and choices. “Have to” often implies unchosen obligations, and can be, but is not always, incompatible with respecting your children’s autonomy and preferences.

“Have to” is an awkward pairing, called a “quasimodal” in the English language. I wrote in 2014 that whenever I encounter “have to” I mentally switch it to “have *an obligation* to”. I think this is often what is meant by “have to”, but not always. Digging deeper, this use often masks other valid uses, and does so in a devious way. Let me show you.

Here are at least three versions of “have to” that each have conceptual utility:

*Have **an obligation** to...*

*Have **a desire** to...*

*Have **a need** to...*

Here are some examples of each of these uses as it concerns the parent/child dynamic:

Sweetie, you have to get dressed if you want go play at your friend’s house.

Darling, you have to brush your teeth before bed.

Buddy, you have to turn off the computer before we can leave for soccer practice.

If you are wondering which version of “have to” goes where, that was intentional. Actually, each version fits each of these sentences, and they will make sense, though the conceptual meaning will change. Let me demonstrate with the first sentence:

*Sweetie, you have [an obligation] to get dressed if you want to go play at your friend’s house. **The obligation is there due to the friend’s***

parents' requirement of wearing clothes at their house or the parent's own requirement for wearing clothing outside the house.

*Sweetie, you have [a desire] to get dressed if you want to go play at your friend's house. **The desire to get dressed is secondary to the desire to play at the friend's house or go outside, where which wearing clothing is required by one or the other parent.***

*Sweetie, you have [a need] to get dressed if you want to go play at your friend's house. **The need is there due to the clothing requirement obligation, but also because wearing clothing in our society and for our species is a general need.***

There are similar reasons for each version of "have to" for the other two example sentences. Obligations, needs, and desires are separate but often related concepts. The deviousness is present when the needs and desires are the parent's, but obligation for the child is implied.

Let me clarify this using the second example sentence:

Darling, you have [an obligation to satisfy both your health need and my financial need] to brush your teeth before bed.

The child has a health need and the parent has a financial need to protect the child's teeth, so "have to" allows the parent to say both "have a need to" and "have an obligation to" simultaneously, and thus the implication is clear: you must brush your teeth, *or else*. The "or else" implication could mean "or else your teeth will suffer and ultimately cause you pain," or it could just as easily be inferred as "or else I will make you suffer and/or cause you pain."

"Have to" used in these mixed ways are often enforced with threats of punishment, implied or made explicit. If this is the context in which "have to" is usually implied, then it has become shorthand for "have an obligation to, or else". "Have to" then becomes something that parents dedicated to replacing rules and obligations with principles and choices must be very cautious of.

Personally, when “have to” is soon to roll off my tongue, I perform a quick filter in my mind, passing my entire sentence through each version listed above, ie. have *an obligation* to, have *a desire* to, and have *a need* to. Once I figure out which of these I really mean, I then break it apart critically with the goal of presenting principles and choices instead of rules and obligations, and never threats of punishment. It becomes a discussion and a negotiation with my children much like it would other adults, rather than commands and control.

I hope this analysis proves useful to other parents who have decided to respect their children’s autonomy and preferences by living by principles and choices instead of rules and obligations. One final note: this analysis is not limited to the parent/child dynamic, but can also be helpful in the realm of politics.