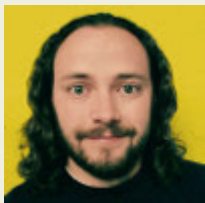


# Why Negotiate with Children?



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*“One Improved Unit” is an original column appearing sporadically on Friday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by the founder and editor Skyler J. Collins. Archived columns can be found [here](#). OIU-only RSS feed available [here](#).*

Learning to live with others can be challenging. When their attempts to meet their needs interferes with our attempts to meet ours, conflict may ensue. This is no less true between adults as between adults and children or children and children. If one values peace and cooperation over strife and domination, he must learn the art of negotiation. And just as importantly, he must teach it to his children.

## **The Art of Negotiation**

I don't know if there was any advance among ancient humans, or even their primeval ancestors, that was more important toward survival than learning to negotiate. How many violent conflicts, and thus death, have been avoided because two or more parties were willing to negotiate the meeting of each other's needs? I don't know, but since it happens so often today in peaceful society, I imagine it was an important social revolution at the time.

Negotiation is simply a discussion aimed at reaching an agreement. Party A wants something of Party B, and possibly but necessarily vice versa, so Party A presents Party B with a proposition, an offer. The fact that Party A is attempting negotiation rather than rank domination is evidence that Party A considers Party B as a political equal and as autonomous, ie. Party A respects Party B, at least enough to prefer primarily to negotiate. How much Party A respects Party B will be revealed as the negotiation proceeds. Party B considers the proposition, and either accepts or counters. Party B has needs of his own and may or may not be satisfied that they'll be met if he accepts Party A's first proposition. The negotiation proceeds from here.

If the two parties are able to reach agreement, the negotiation is over and they proceed to fulfill their obligations to one another. If they aren't, they either break off negotiation and go about their own business, or Party A decides Party B's unwillingness or inability to reach agreement is unacceptable, and resorts to coercion, the act of threatening something

unexpected and undesirable or of using force. This represents an escalation from peaceful negotiation to coercive domination of Party A over Party B.

## **Negotiating with Children**

If the survival of our ancestors, and the survival of adults today depends on their willingness and ability to negotiate, then negotiation is one of the most important skills to teach to children. And there is hardly a better way to teach something to children than by modeling it with them personally. From the moment they're born, children should be taught the art of negotiation. Infants who want to pull your hair, toddlers who want to explore that expensive vase, or children who feel a need to run around and scream, all should be approached in the spirit of negotiation. Be clear about your needs and the needs of affected others, try to understand your child's needs, and then find a way to meet everyone's needs together. The more children hear about your needs, in a respectful way, and the more their own needs are given due consideration, the more likely they are to find your suggested corrections to their behavior as acceptable.

My own children are nine, five, and an infant. I negotiate with each of them everyday on various things. My nine-year-old son often prefers to stay home and play on his computer when his mother and I really want his company at an activity outside the house. Do I tell him he doesn't have a choice and coerce him into the car? No. I ask him what it'll take for him to join us. As he beats around the bush because he's still developing communication skills, I begin making propositions, such as letting him choose the radio station we listen to, or offering to buy him a treat, or even offering a dollar or two, depending on how much a value his attendance. We usually come to an agreement, but when we don't, he simply stays home; no hard feelings, though maybe a little disappointment, either way.

My five-year old daughter is likewise negotiated with, and she often stays home with her big brother. The more my needs can't be met without their cooperation, the more I'm willing to give up something of higher and higher value. These days I see my children negotiating with each other all the time. These negotiations sometimes break down and things escalate, and sometimes negotiation is never initially considered, but the more we as parents have negotiated with them, the more they've learned and preferred to negotiate with others. Even my infant can be cooed and coddled out of pulling my hair.

## **Final Thoughts**

Why negotiate with children? Shouldn't they learn that adults are always the boss over them, and learn to follow orders? Spare me. Children are people, deserving respect and having autonomy. If we want them to learn the art of negotiation, thereby ensuring more peaceful and prosperous relationships in the future, we must teach them the art of negotiation, of win-win solutions. Failing that, we instead teach them the art of domination,

of win-lose, of might makes right. We either raise and send negotiators out into the world, or we raise and send out dominators. Which is more likely to ensure they not only survive, but thrive? The answer is clear.

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