

An illustration at the top of the page shows two hands, one on the left and one on the right, holding a light blue banner. The hands are rendered in a simple, line-art style. The banner is a solid light blue color and contains the title text in white, all-caps font. The background behind the banner is a light purple color with faint, stylized floral or leaf-like patterns.

EMPOWER YOUR CHILD TO BE KIND AND ASSERTIVE

MAMA *rhythm*

Empower Your Child to be Kind and Assertive

by Jenni Burks

At just three years old, our daughter Bear is very outgoing most of the time. There are times she's timid, but usually that's more because she needs food or sleep than because she feels shy.

She usually loves greeting people. And she **loves** the greeters at Walmart.

We teach our kids a lot about "tricky people" and safety. At the same time, we also teach them about loving our neighbors by being friendly and polite. There is so much to learn about both concepts and all the nuances in between.

One woman who works as a greeter at our local Walmart especially enjoys interactions with Bear. Bear and I made a quick Walmart run the other day, and this sweet woman was on the job. As usual, Bear made a point of getting eye contact, waving, and cheerily saying "hi!!" on our way in.

That day I let her "help" me push the cart for the first time. She felt like a big girl walking around. After we finished shopping and checking out, the greeter saw us heading toward the exit.

"Oh wait a minute! I have something for you!" she called as she rushed to grab a roll of iconic yellow smiley face stickers.

Bear immediately became uncomfortable and pushed close to my leg, looking down at the floor. Maybe it felt less secure to be offered a sticker on the ground when she was used to receiving one while in the cart. Whatever the reason, she wasn't open to receiving a sticker right then.

The greeter held a sticker out toward Bear.

Bear shook her head and dropped her chin to her chest allowing her long curls to hide her face. I smiled at the woman and accepted the sticker on Bear's behalf and placed it on my shirt.

"Thank you! Have a great day!" I cheerily told the greeter.

Disappointed, the greeter pulled another bright yellow sticker from the roll and held it out towards Bear.

"Here, now. Your mama took one. You saw how to do it! Now **you** take one too!" She insisted, cheerily, but emphatically disapproving.

Bear burst into tears.

I thanked the greeter again, took the second sticker on my finger, and led Bear out the door. She was sobbing.

On the sidewalk outside the building, I stooped down and gave her a hug. Once she was calm enough to talk I asked why she was so sad.

"Were you feeling shy?" I asked.

"I. said. no. and. don't. want. it. and. she. didn't. do. it." Bear sobbed.

It dawned on me that she wasn't upset because she felt shy. Her tears weren't about the sticker. They weren't about the offer.

She was upset because the greeter didn't respect her "no."

She saw the sticker on my finger and began tearing up again, saying "I don't want to **have** to have that!"

"Honey, you don't have to have this sticker!" I said with surprise.

Her brow furrowed with confusion and relief.

"I just took it from the woman in case you changed your mind and wanted it after all. You don't want it?"

She shook her head. I asked if she wanted to throw it in a nearby trash can. She nodded, and we did. Then we hugged and went to the car.

I replayed the scene in my mind on the drive home, analyzing, making observations, and thinking about what we needed to learn from it.

People think they're being helpful by pushing friendly gestures on "shy" kids.

I don't know the source of the philosophy but I see it often in practice. Along the same lines of picking on a sensitive child to "toughen him up," people force interactions and insist on responses from children who appear shy, often in an effort to "get him out of his shell."

Many really believe they're doing a good thing.
They don't realize they're actually being a bully.

Parents often feel pressure to force their child to take the friendly gesture.

I'm guilty of this, you guys. I have wished so many times I could go back and do things differently with my older kids.

Maybe sometimes we push them out of embarrassment because they're melting down or rude when they reject the gesture. (Word to the wise: **embarrassment is almost always a bad justification for parenting decisions!**)

Maybe we're right there with the camp who's trying to "break" the shyness. Maybe we don't know what to do and we're just trying to be polite in the moment.

We need to recognize the damaging messages this sends the child.

When a child says no to something that's her right to refuse, and an adult forcefully insists, it tells the child that her "no" doesn't warrant respect.

*When a child says no to something that's her right to refuse, and an adult forcefully insists, some children will misunderstand and actually think it's **wrong** to speak up for themselves.*

Notice I said "says no to something that's her right to refuse." I'm not talking about parental instructions for the child's good. I'm all for teaching obedience.

This isn't refusing to take a bath, or clean her room, or stop hitting a sibling. This is turning down a gift she doesn't want.

It's ok to do that.

(I hope you know that it's ok for you to do that, too!)

It's ok to refuse a gift. To set a boundary. To speak up.

Some of us understand this when it comes to physical contact. This is exactly why in our home we don't force our children to hug anyone if they don't want to.

There are some things people have a right to refuse. There are things even a small child has the right to refuse.

I want my children to know this – to practice this.

A healthier response

So you don't want your kid to break down sobbing when she's offered a sticker. Or to scream something rude. Or to take a swing at the Walmart greeter. Or be super anxious about going to Walmart because she doesn't want to be offered a sticker.

The key with this is to teach the child she **can** choose to say "yes" or "no," and to teach her **how to express her "no" appropriately.**

If you teach the child how to express her "no" appropriately you will teach her to be polite. You will empower her to overcome shyness. Those boxes will still get checked.

You will also help her establish a skill that will lead her to have healthier interactions and relationships. In the long run, that's better for all involved. (Even the lady with the stickers.)

Later that day, when Bear was back in her usual happy mood, we talked about how she should handle something like that next time.

If she wants a sticker, she can take it and say, "Thank you."

If she doesn't want a sticker, or if she's feeling uncomfortable, she can try to be brave and say, "No, thank you, I don't want a sticker."

And if the greeter presses after being told "no, thank you," then she can say, "I **said** no thank you."

And she knows mama will back her up.

We have been roleplaying this and other similar hypothetical situations for a few days now. We've thought of times she may need to speak up for herself with her friends, her siblings, and her classmates, and come up with acceptable ways to be kind and assertive.

Maybe next time she feels timid she'll have the courage to speak up.

Even if she doesn't – or if she speaks up inappropriately – Daddy or I will model a confident response for her in the moment if one of us is present, and then we'll just keep working on it.

Feelings are real. Learning takes time.

I'd rather her try to speak up and fail – or speak up rudely – than to think she can't speak up at all.