

# Julie King – How to use playfulness to get your child to cooperate (even when you aren't feeling playful)

*In this interview with Julie King, co-author of two best-selling books: "How To Talk So LITTLE Kids Will Listen" and "How To Talk When Kids Won't Listen", she shares how to use playfulness to get your kids to cooperate.*

*Julie also shares how to use playfulness even when you aren't feeling playful, and how to manage your own negative emotions.*



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## About Julie King

Julie King is the author, with Joanna Faber, of two best-selling books: *How To Talk So LITTLE Kids Will Listen: A Survival Guide to Life with Children Ages 2-7*, which has been translated into 28 languages world-wide, and their new book, *How To Talk When Kids Won't Listen: Whining, Fighting, Meltdowns, Defiance, and Other Challenges of Childhood*, currently being translated into 17 languages.



Julie and Joanna also collaborated on the companion app *HOW TO TALK: Parenting Tips in Your Pocket*, and the app *Parenting Hero*.

Julie leads workshops online, consults with parents of children ages two to teens by phone and video, and speaks publicly to schools, businesses, and parent groups across the United States and internationally. She received her AB from Princeton University and a JD from Yale Law School.

Julie and her husband live in the San Francisco Bay Area in California, where they are visited now and then by their three grown children. Visit her at [JulieKing.org](http://JulieKing.org), on [Facebook: faberandking](https://www.facebook.com/faberandking), and on Instagram: [@howtotalkforparents](https://www.instagram.com/howtotalkforparents).

**Special offer:** Use code **NewZ10** to save USD\$10 off your first private consultation or any 4-week workshop offered by Julie King.

## Why telling your kids what they need to do creates resistance (and what to do instead)

*Julie King shares why directly telling your children what to do can often make getting cooperation more difficult.*

**Sue Meintjes:** What is your favorite technique or strategy that is working well for you or your clients, for getting kids to listen, or increasing the chances of them cooperating?

**Julie King:** Let me start by saying that it often seems like the most efficient way to get a child to do something is to tell them directly, "Put your shoes on," "Get in the car," "Leave the cat alone." But the problem is that when we tell them something to do directly, we're working against ourselves, because we create resistance.

Kids don't like to be told what to do. In fact, people don't like to be told what to do.

If you think about your own life, and if you have a partner who, when you come home, says to you, "Oh, good, your home, hang up your coat, put away your things, I need you to set the table. Did I say to read the newspaper? Uh-uh, don't check your email right now. Put that phone down!" You would immediately feel resistance, right? Like, "Wait a second, why is this person talking to me this way?" And our kids have the very same reaction.



So, the challenge for us as parents is to figure out how we can make it more likely that our kids will want to do what we want them to do, without creating more resistance.

## A simple technique to use “playfulness” to get your kids to cooperate

*Julie shares her favorite technique to get kids to cooperate, and an easy technique to be playful even when you feel you aren't “the playful type”.*

**Julie King:** So, you asked me for one of my top favorite strategies for little kids. My favorite strategy is to be playful.

Often when I say that people think, “Ugh, I'm not really the playful type. It takes so much energy; I don't even know what to do.” So, in our books, we have a lot of ideas for how to be playful, but I'm going to share with you one of my favorites, which is to make an inanimate object talk.

So, let's say you're trying to get your child to put her shoes on.

Instead of doing the nagging, “Honey, don't you run away from me! Come back here! We have to get your shoes on right now!” You can instead pick up the shoes and make them talk. “I feel so empty and lonely. I need a foot in me.”

Suddenly, your little child who had no interest in shoes a minute ago, will be coming over and sticking her feet in the shoes and probably talking to them as well. “Oh, here shoes. Here we go. I'll

warm you up. Here's my foot." So that's one of my favorite strategies for getting little kids to cooperate.

And when we say we want kids to listen, what we really mean is we want them to do what we need them to do. To behave. So that is my favorite strategy.

## Why “playfulness” is such a powerful technique to increase cooperation

*Here's how being playful allows you to avoid creating resistance and tantrums, making it much easier for your children to cooperate.*

**Sue Meintjes:** That sounds very useful, I love simple ways to make things more playful. Do you think this works because it calms down your child? Why is this so useful?

**Julie King:** It can calm their nervous system. It doesn't create the resistance that ordering them around can create. Kids love to play. That's sort of their language, right? That's what they want to do and that's how they learn.

If you have a child who's engaged in some activity and you need them to stop, and to do what you need them to do, you have to understand that they don't have a lot of motivation and they don't yet have a lot of inner control.

They don't have a lot of self-discipline to say, “Well, I really want to be playing, but I really should stop because it's time for us to go and my mother is telling me I need to get my shoes on. I really

should do that." They're focused on what they're interested in and what they're doing.

If we can get them focused on another activity that to them feels like play, then we don't develop that resistance where they start to dysregulate and cry and scream and say, "No, and you can't make me!" We're trying to avoid that altogether.

If we can catch them before they're resistant, then we just have a lot less work to do to get them to do what we need them to do.

## The most helpful thing to do when your child is heading towards a tantrum

*Here Julie shares why reassurance, logic, and explanation won't help prevent a tantrum, and what to do instead. She also shares a simple trick to help children transition from what they are currently doing, to what you want them to do.*

**Sue Meintjes:** That makes sense. How do we use this attitude of playfulness when our child is starting to move into negative emotions, like heading towards a tantrum?

**Julie King:** Well, it might seem counterintuitive. Let's say they're tantruming because they say, "No, I want to finish making my block tower." Again, it might seem that the easiest way to calm them is to say, "It's okay. It's okay. Don't worry. You're going to get to play later."

Instead, rather than trying to get them to not feel what they feel, the most helpful thing we can do is to acknowledge how they do feel. "Oh, it's so frustrating when you're in the middle of making a tower and it's time to leave. I wish we could stop time so you could finish."

So, what am I doing there? I'm putting into words how she's feeling. I'm saying, "You wish that we could stay." Then I'm putting wishes into fantasy, because of course I can't actually stop time, but "I wish I could, and then you could finish what you wanted to do."

So that's the strategy that I would use if I saw a child heading into a tantrum, because that can settle them before they get into a rage, before they get into that tantruming state. Once they're in it, it's very hard to connect with them because then they can't hear a thing that you say. They're screaming, they're loud, they're kicking.

It's like they're heading towards the cliff of a tantrum. And if you notice it's happening, rather than trying to reassure them, which is sometimes our natural inclination, rather than saying, "It's okay. It's okay. It's not such a big deal. You can play with it later." All this reassurance and logic and explanation just goes over their head. They don't want to hear it. They don't hear it, they don't listen. It doesn't help them calm down. They keep heading towards that tantrum cliff. Whereas if you say, "Ugh, you're in the middle of it. You don't want to hear *it's time to go*. This is so hard" it can help them calm down, rather than escalating into a tantrum.



Now, some kids, after we say that, will need some help transitioning into the “moving-on” stage. So, after we have acknowledged that they wish they could continue to build this block tower, we might say, “Let me write it down in the calendar so I remember when we come back that that’s what you wanted to do.”

## How to manage your own negative emotions when your children start behaving badly

*Julie talks about what to do to manage your own negative emotions and how to let them out in a positive manner that not only calms you down, but also models to your children how to manage their own emotions positively.*

**Sue Meintjes:** That makes sense! How would you deal with your own negative emotions? For example, when my daughter starts going into a tantrum state, I also start getting emotional and having strong feelings.

**Julie King:** The hardest part is to notice that we’re going to that place. I’ll speak for myself. When my kids were younger, I would notice I was going to that place where I felt like I wanted to yell... let’s just say...very unhelpful things.

I wanted to say some loud, hurtful things to my kids when I was really frustrated. One of the things that helped me was to say, “I am so frustrated! I need a break,” and I would go into the bathroom, or sometimes I would go into my closet, which I share

with my husband. I would step into the closet and close the door so the kids couldn't get in, and then I could say some of the nasty things that I wanted to say to them so they wouldn't actually hear it.

So, the first step is to notice that you're going to that rageful place. Sometimes you feel it in your stomach. Sometimes I just felt like my body was tense and I felt like I had this volcano inside me that wanted to erupt.

And I knew when that happened, that saying the things that I felt like saying was going to feel good in the moment, but it was not going to feel good in the long run. So, I could catch myself when I had that feeling and do something for myself.

At times I couldn't even go into another space. Sometimes I couldn't go step into the bathroom or step into the closet because of circumstances or the ages of the kids. And sometimes for me it was helpful for me to just say out loud, "I AM SO FRUSTRATED!"

What was I doing there?

I was talking about my own feelings, which is also what we do for our kids when they're having strong feelings. We put into words how they're feeling.

Sometimes I needed to do it for myself. "I am so frustrated! I hate it when we're late! I had everything together, and then nobody's putting their shoes on, and I'm worried about missing the appointment and I just can't stand this. I get so frustrated. I don't

know what to do with myself." Maybe I'd stomp my feet a bit. Talking about my feelings, doing something physical... That often helped me so that I didn't say something hurtful.

And, it has the side benefit of modeling for our children what they can do when they're feeling very angry and frustrated. Because those feelings don't just go away. If we say to ourselves, "Well, I'm going to white knuckle it and not say anything" the feelings still brew inside us. We are better off figuring out a way to let it out without doing any harm.

## Why you should avoid the word "you" when expressing your feelings...and what to say instead

*How to express your frustrations and feelings, without putting your kids on the defensive.*

**Sue Meintjes:** I love the idea of expressing how your child is making you feel, instead of lashing out at your children. It is a useful concept and tool.

**Julie King:** Yeah. And the more that you can avoid saying that word "you", the less likely they will feel defensive. Because if I say to you, "I feel frustrated when you don't cooperate..." Well, you're going to tell me why you can't do what I want you to do. But if I just express my feelings and they're my feelings, well nobody can argue with my feelings.

When I say, "I just get so frustrated when I say it's time to go and I don't see it happen," I'm avoiding the whole, "You don't do this, and

how many times do I have to tell you.”

But I also can't just pretend that I'm feeling calm when I'm not. I can pretend a little, if I'm just mildly irritated, but when I'm feeling in a rage, when I'm just feeling so super frustrated, I need to be able to express it or take care of myself somehow.

I don't know a single parent who doesn't at some point get very frustrated and angry with their children. It's just normal. The question is, “What do we do with that feeling? How do we manage it ourselves?” We don't want our children to start attacking other kids when they get angry, either physically or verbally.

Using I-statements, starting with the word “I”, like “I'm feeling so frustrated,” is much more helpful than attacking a child, because they are watching and learning from us all the time.

## **Where to find more strategies to get your child to cooperate without having to order them around**

**Sue Meintjes:** That's helpful. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Julie King:** I just want to say that I've given you a few strategies, but I have so many more in our books. I talked about being playful, but there are so many other ways to make it more likely that a child will choose to do what you want them to do without ordering them around.

Here's a challenge for your readers: think about how often you tell a child directly what you need them to do and try being playful, or one of the other eight strategies we have in our book for not telling them directly and see what happens.

Test it out and then contact me. Write to me! I love getting emails from parents who tell me what they've tried and what worked or what didn't work.



## Action steps

*Here are my action steps that I got from this interview. I hope you'll find these useful as well:*

- Next time you want your kid to do something you think they won't want to do, instead of asking them directly, try making an inanimate object talk
- Think of some more ideas how you can incorporate playfulness into your interaction with your kids
- When you are angry or frustrated with your kids, try to tell them how you feel, using "I-statements", without using the word "you"
- When you notice your child heading into a tantrum, try helping them identify their feelings and granting them their wish in fantasy
- Identify a "special place" where you can go to get away from your children when you become upset or frustrated with them
- Visit Julie's website at [JulieKing.org](http://JulieKing.org), or follow her on [Facebook: faberandking](https://www.facebook.com/faberandking), and on Instagram: [@howtotalkforparents](https://www.instagram.com/howtotalkforparents).

