

Never (ever) Promise Anything to a Child (ever)



Little Michael points excitedly from his stroller at King Arthur's Carrousel at Disneyland. His mom and I are chatting when she breaks away and says, "Yes, I see it! We'll go on that later."

Her words sound my parental alarm, and I grab her arm. With urgency I tell her, "No, don't ever promise a kid you're going to do something later. Are you crazy?"

It's a rookie mistake. Michael is 2, and he's her first. Good thing she has me to guide her through this hard-and-fast parenting rule.

Any experienced parent knows that a kid will remember and hold you to whatever you tell him he is going to do – especially something that (a) is fun or (b) tastes good. No matter what transpires, if you promise a child that you'll take him somewhere or let him do or eat something, he will bank on it. Without a doubt, it has to happen.

I'm absolutely certain that the children of the Titanic, as they were being rowed out on lifeboats while the "unsinkable" ship sank in front of them, whined to their weeping mothers, "But you said we were going to have ice cream tonight!"

This memory muscle doesn't work as well when telling them things such as, "We need to remember to stop at the bank," or "Don't let me forget to give you your antibiotics." You will have to remind them over and over again to brush their teeth. However, they have an ironclad memory for the good stuff.

It seems like a paradox that we teach our kids to commit, follow through and stand by their word – yet smart parents will never, ever commit themselves to a single thing. You check that luxury at the door of the hospital as you leave with your first child, along with the hope of ever appearing cool in your kids' eyes or being able to watch the evening news without bursting into tears. Those things just aren't going to happen. Being noncommittal is really good for the entire family.

Short of handing out a notarized statement declaring any future "promises" to be null and void if any of the following things occur – natural disaster, illness, something better on TV than "SpongeBob" or one or both parents hospitalized – just nixing promises from your vernacular for the next 20 years is your best bet.

Back at Disneyland, I try to help my friend by advising her to remember the following phrases: "We'll see." "I'm not making any promises." "OK, we'll add that to our list."

I tell her to write them down on a piece of paper. "Sleep with them under your pillow," I say. "Embrace them. I promise you won't be sorry." Well ... I mean, I don't promise, promise.

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