



by Karen Stephens

Dawdling: Patience, Prompts, and Communication Helps Kids Move Along

A friend told me that one day she realized she told her child to “Hurry up, Honey” more often than she told him she loved him. It was a wake-up call. She knew then, something needed to change.

You could be in the same position: Constantly coaxing your child to scoot along, pick up the pace, or to get their motor running.

Dawdling is very common for preschoolers, but can linger into school-age years, too. Some children dawdle more than others — even within the same family.

A child being a bit of a slower-mover isn’t bad in itself; but in today’s hurried family life, it can be especially frustrating to parents trying to balance work and family responsibilities. And children will need self-direction and time management to succeed at school and work.

Why Children Dawdle

There are varying causes for dawdling. Most children intensely concentrate on just one thing at a time. Children aren’t famous for multi-tasking like their working parents are, so we perceive them as dawdling.

Children are keenly in tune with curiosity. When something captures their eye, they submerge themselves in wonder. They “tune into” fascinations so deeply, that it’s easy to “tune out” what is going on around them. No one dives so deeply into learning as children. Such focus is to be envied, even when it does slow family routines.

Temperamentally, some children are just slower to respond to transitions. For whatever reason, their individual style is less hurried. Calm and “easy does it” is part of their personality.

Dawdling can be a passive way to engage in a power-struggle with parents. If a child holds a grudge about something, they might use dawdling as a way to “get back” at parents. That’s not a good strategy, but children often use behavior to show us their displeasure. That can continue until they effectively identify and express their feelings directly.

Responses to Avoid

Before I cite productive responses to dawdling, let me suggest things to avoid:

- Resist over-reacting emotionally and verbally to dawdling. A parent’s outburst frightens and overwhelms children, or leads them to think that dawdling gets attention.
- Don’t label or name-call your child the “dawdler” of the family. Avoid calling children “slow poke” or “turtle.” Don’t tolerate siblings teasing or name calling. Those taunting responses hurt feelings rather than motivate cooperation. Children often accept the labels we put on them and then live up to them — consciously or not. So choose words wisely.

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- Avoid bribery to speed up dawdling, such as offering candy or a trip to a movie. This merely teaches children how to dawdle until a bribe is offered.
- Resist telling children multiple times to “hurry up.” If children learn you’ll say it four or five times, they’ll wait that long to begin moving.
- Don’t humiliate with words or mean-spirited consequences. This simply creates bigger problems and undermines children’s trust.

Certainly don’t follow this parent’s lead: A mother made her 11-year-old daughter come to breakfast whether she was fully dressed on time or not. The daughter — even at age 40 — hasn’t forgotten the shame of having to sit in front of her father and brothers half-naked. With head bowed and arms crossed on her chest, she told a parenting group: “I still can’t believe how much my mom hated me being a dawdler. How could she think that was a good way to get me to hurry up?” I’m sure the mother never guessed her action would leave just a lasting, devastating memory. But it did.

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Respectful Responses to Dawdling

- Be a good role model for being prompt. Kids will do as you do, not as you say. If you frequently rush around late for appointments, work toward better time management. Avoid speeding in traffic trying to “make up” time when you run late; the kids in the car will notice and adopt the same habit.
- Daily give your child individual attention and engaged interaction so there’s no doubt you love them, whether they dawdle or not.
- Appreciate and comment upon your child’s strengths, rather than focus only on dawdling. Often slower-paced children have patience and keen eyes for observation so they create amazing projects. Reinforce those talents.
- When dawdling tests your patience, remain calm. Take a deep breath and maintain composure.
- Limit distractions to help children focus and direct themselves. For some children, music helps them clean up toys. For others, it distracts them into dawdling through dance. Observe your child to see what aids focus and what interrupts attention span.
- Prevent problems by using prompts for transitions. A parent’s verbal instruction to get ready can be helpful. But some kids are more alert to visual signals. And they often see concrete signals as more “objective.” A timer, flicker of lights, tickled piano keys, or turned off radio can be a “non-verbal” signal children will respond to more easily than repeated verbal reminders. Your child can even help select a signal. Let them decide if a bell will be rung or flag waved when it’s time to begin chores.
- Use charts or posted cards to cue children along steps in a process. For instance, to help morning routines, post pictures from left to right of how to proceed. Break the steps down into as much detail as your particular child needs. For instance: 1. make bed; 2. feed pet; 3. eat breakfast; 4. brush teeth; 5. wash face; 6. get dressed; 7. find backpack.
- Anticipate dawdling to avoid problems. Warn preschoolers of distractions they’ll have to resist. “It’s going to be hard leaving the zoo; but once the sun is straight up in the sky, we’ll have to wave good-bye to the animals.”
- Honestly talk to your child about your feelings about dawdling. “When you dawdle, it really frustrates me. I don’t like to be late for work. Let’s think of ways to help you get ready more quickly. We’ll take turns.”

- Help your child identify the difference between dawdling and cooperating. Your child will gain more self control when he/she recognizes dawdling. You can help by gently bringing their attention to the times they dawdle: “Jason, you’re to be brushing your teeth now, not watching television. Stay focused.”
- Communicate expectations for cooperation once. If a child doesn’t respond, apply a logical consequence rather than nagging. Consequences should be respectful, reasonable, and relevant. You’ll select consequences based on your child’s age and ability to understand. Here’s a respectful consequence: “If you don’t come for breakfast when called, you’ll have to wait until lunch to eat.” Or, “If you come to breakfast late, you’ll have to make something for yourself and eat alone.”

No matter what parents do, some children’s personal idle will never shift into second gear quickly. It’s a fact of life. Patience, prompts, and communication will be the best strategies for managing life with a slower-paced child.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.