

## Managing Car Time

Finding balance in our parenting lives means finding balance in everything we do with our children. This month I'm addressing a parent's question about car rides. How can car time be made sane? How do you stay in balance in the car?! In order to remain in control, sometimes we need to give a little control to our children.

Sibling fights in the car are a common complaint and often start with who gets to sit in the front. When states mandate that young children sit in the back and everyone use a seatbelt—when a parent can say, "It's the law, there's nothing I can do about it"—limits are clear and arguments are few. But when a parent dictates the rule, children learn how to fight it, because parents tend to waffle.

In order to stay out of that battle, give the decision to your kids. If you need structure around this, try, "You guys are perfectly capable of working out seating arrangements yourselves. The only rule I have is that your decision is made before we get to the car. If there's an argument at the car, you will both sit in the back." Then really do stay out of it. If they end up in the back, calmly say, "Next time, you can work it out with each other."

We get out of balance and out of control when we think we have to make all the decisions, set lots of rules, and know what is best—in other words, when we don't trust our children's natural ability to be civil. You may say, "Civil! My kids are ready to kill each other!" But how and when did it go wrong? How long have they been told what to do and how to do it? How often have they had the chance to *really* work it out with only your help and support, not your demands?

Fighting in the car pushes buttons for most parents. Everyone is trapped. People are in close quarters. Instead of thinking that your children are out to get you as soon as you hit the road, think about the difficult environment that all of you are in. You must stay focused on driving and probably become easily stressed by loud kids either being silly or fighting. Most of the time, your kids are in the car because *you* need them to be there, not because they choose to be there. They are too close to each other and unable to get away. The air is fraught with tension.

Try compassion for a change instead of anger and blame to gain cooperation. Remember that balance means that *all of you* have rights and needs that are important.

When behavior is bad, stop the car *every time*, even if you're late, until only a word is necessary. In our family, we would say, "Difficult driving conditions!" and our kids would bring it down. Kids can easily understand the safety issue and respect your need for a calm car *when you do not blame them*. Give your kids the option of getting out of the car to blow off steam or quieting down in the car. State how frustrating it is for all of you as well as how unsafe it is to drive. When they are yelled at and feel blamed, expect the fights to continue. You will never get the respect you need, if they do not get the respect they need.

At home, talk about car time—how hard it is to be trapped in close quarters and how unsafe it is to drive unless everyone is calm. Then ask each of them to suggest what they need to make car time easier for them. Take their suggestions seriously and ask, "How can we make that happen?" (even when

it's, "Leave her at home!") You can make suggestions including activities and car games but leave the decisions up to them.

To find balance in your relationship with your children, you must let go of needing to have all the answers. Parenting is so much easier than most of us make it. When we turn over responsibility to our children to find solutions that work, we teach them how capable and responsible they are. When we think we have to have all the answers, we carry a heavy burden that weighs us down and provokes our frustration, anger and resentment. That's when we lose control and parent in ways that don't work.

If your kids are used to feeling blamed and criticized, to having you tell them what to do and solving their problems for them, it will take awhile for them to get used to it. Don't give up if it doesn't work right away. It's much easier for them when you take all the responsibility. Creating balance is hard work, but in the end, it will make your life so much easier.