



## Parenting with Confidence

# Help the Medicine Go Down Without a Spoonful of Sugar

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### Dear Dr. Kay,

My 4-year-old will not take her medicine in the morning. Every day, it is a horrible struggle that ruins our morning. She is a strong-willed child, and this has become our morning ritual, even though it is miserable. We try reasoning with her and threatening to take things away, like television. Now we feel like we have to up the ante and offer her the sun and the moon just to take her medicine!

### Dear Parent,

Some behaviors are up for negotiation, and some are not. A child can tell which commands are bendable based on everything from a parent's mood to tone of voice. I assume this medicine is mandatory, since you would not go through all of this for the sake of a vitamin. I also wonder to what degree your daughter may respond with opposition to other requests. Frequent defiance may indicate other problems that deserve a more careful evaluation.

Here is some wisdom that might help you find the best solution in order to parent with confidence when it comes to the medicine:

❖ First of all, if you can say, "You have five minutes to make up your mind and get it over with," that is great! If a child responds to humor or to a promise for a bite of ice cream

to swallow it, go for it! Even offering a consistent incentive or reward for being such a "big girl" for taking her medicine is fine, as long as you do not become trapped in a pattern of random emotional bribes or excessive negotiations, which can actually heighten a child's stubbornness.

❖ Our job as parents is to manage behavior, even if it means that, for a moment, our child "hates" us. If you are feeling guilt, doubt and uncertainty in a moment of parenting that requires certainty, try remembering that your child's maturity includes developing the ability to cope with daily challenges.

❖ Attachment to you is powerful, and so is mastering the task of taking medicine. The challenge belongs to her, not you. If you get caught up in working so hard to get her to cooperate, you run the risk that mastering medicine is now your problem! Have faith that she

can master medicine, just as she will need to master every "hard to swallow" event in her life! Self-esteem actually comes from such mastery.

❖ Be careful to use a matter of fact approach and a firm tone, rather than a "would you please?" approach. A request invites the choice to decline your offer!

❖ Since your morning power struggle has become a "ritual," talk with your daughter the evening before in order to help ensure a positive outcome. Briefly and confidently, say, for example, "Every morning we go through this fighting over medication... This is going to stop... Taking your medicine is not a choice. You can take your medicine all by yourself."

❖ Warning! Regardless of your resolve, be prepared for the fact that your child may test your confidence to see if you mean what you say.

❖ Let your daughter know that, while she has no choice about taking the medicine, she does, indeed, have the choice to take it by herself (without two adults hovering over her, I

might add). Otherwise, you offer to help her until she can choose to do it herself.

❖ If your daughter does the usual opposition or whining, calmly and firmly repeat that you expect her to take the medicine, and wait (stop talking), i.e. "It is time to take it yourself or either Dad or Mom will help you take it."

❖ Act like a technician in a hospital—caring but firm and calm. This is key, because any emotionality should be left for your anxious or angry child to work through.

❖ Your child will thrive from your confident authority. It helps her have the strength to work through her fear and let go of her rigidity in order to do the right thing.

❖ To gain her respect and reinforce her capability, you may add afterwards, "I am sorry that this was difficult for you. Perhaps tomorrow, you will have an easier time taking it by yourself so we don't have to help you." No need to shower a lot of praise, which can also make it about pleasing you.

Parenting requires mindfulness and an ability to "wear the hat" of authority when needed. Remember, if you often invite your child's opinion or appear to be open to changing your mind, expect a power struggle when you try to have the upper hand. If this style of parenting is wearing you down, be careful to work on your voice of authority and to draw the line more often with respect to behaviors that are non-negotiable. Finally, if you cannot muster up the clarity and confidence to get through this challenge or if your child becomes violent, i.e. kicks, has tantrums, throws up or bangs her head, further consultation and support is necessary.

*Kay Kosak Abrams is a licensed clinical psychologist who is working to bring psychology to the community through her public speaking, writing and educational recordings. Join her for a monthly "Parenting Coffeehouse" for inspiration about how to parent with greater confidence. For details, go to [www.kayabrams.com](http://www.kayabrams.com).*

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- Medical evaluations
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