

Premack Principle

We are talking this week about the Premack Principle. So, this is probably something that you already do, but of course you don't know a technical name for it, and you probably don't know how to use it really effectively and efficiently to cut back on the nagging, repeatedly asking our kids to do stuff over and over, and that can turn into an argument and that can escalate. We've all been there. We have all done this before. If we can cut that out, let's just get rid of it. Let's just get to the point and reinforcement those good behaviors with something called the Premack Principle. It's also called Grandma's Rule, which might make it easier to remember, so you're not trying to learn all these technical words all the time.

What is Grandma's Rule? First, eat your vegetables, then you can have some ice cream. That's it. First, do something you have to do, and then you get a reward. It's just doing things in a natural order with that positive reinforcement. What do you need your kiddo to do first in order to get what they want? You do this. We do this for ourselves. You do this for your kiddos, but you don't always say it out loud, and you probably don't know the name for it, but the idea here is to say it out loud. "First, clean your room, then you can play." "First, do your homework, then you get screen time." It's a very, very simple one, two sentence interaction with your kiddo. First, what's the target behavior? What's the expected behavior? What are my expectations right now? First, do this.

It's not, "First, I really need you to clean your room. You haven't been cleaning it up lately, and it is such a mess, and I'm going to trip and fall and you're going to trip and fall, and you never know where anything is, and blah ..." Did you even listen to all that I was saying? Is your kiddo going to listen when you start in to one of those lecturing tirades? No. Are they going to follow through and do what you need them to do? Probably not, and going into all that lecture stuff is going to make them just check out, first of all, stop listening. They're not going to engage in the desired behavior, and how does that help your relationship with them and your communication, building up those positive interactions, having more of that with your kiddo, and less of the nagging, and the lecturing, and the unfun, and feeling like mean mommy all the time, which I get. I've totally been there and how to be like, what am I doing? Stop. Stop. This isn't helping anybody.

So, first, clean your room, then you can choose an activity, and we'll do it together. Then, you can watch TV. Then you can have a treat. Whatever it is that your kiddo likes and wants as a reinforcer. That's it. It's just telling them very clearly what they need to do. First do this, and then you can have this, and making sure that whatever you're offering them as the then is good. Ask him. "First clean your room, and then what would you like as a reward?"

Who knows. Maybe they'll come up with something easier and cheaper and quicker than what you were thinking of, and maybe they won't and then you'll have to negotiate and come up with a better plan, but it's really just stating this contingency that you have in place, you're thinking in your mind, okay, after they do their homework, I'm going to let them get on the iPad.

Well, why don't you just tell them that? "First do your homework, then you can have the iPad." Also, if you hear in my tone of voice when I'm saying it, it's that it's a happy thing. I'm offering you this reward. I'm offering you this reinforcement, and that's a good thing. It's not a lecture. It's not nagging. It's not me coming down hard on you, it's a happy thing. First do this expected behavior that I need you to do, and then you can have this wonderful, exciting reward, whatever that is for your kiddo at the time.

One example I like to share with moms groups is when I took my daughter, my firstborn, and we tagged along on one of my husband's work trips. She was 18, 19 months, and so I thought it was this great idea for she and I to fly out to Denver, which is a super fun city, so it was a good idea. It's a little stressful, staying in a hotel room. We were in this awful rental car. We were getting that rear-facing infant seat. I literally had to open the trunk. It was a Volkswagen Beetle. I had to open the trunk and climb through the trunk to strap the baby into the car. It was a little stressful, a little much, but we made it, we did it. We had a great trip.

I take her to the Denver zoo by myself while my husband's working. First zoo trip, and we're alone, and I've got her in the stroller. We go and see the tiger. It was the first thing we saw. I let her out of the stroller to toddle around and look and roar at the tiger and have so much fun. Things are going well. I need to put her back in the stroller to go on to the next exhibit, because it's really spread out. She cannot walk an entire zoo at 18 months.

Well, she wouldn't have it. She did not want to get back in that stroller, and everybody in a one mile radius was aware of it. She was screaming and crying and flailing, and here I am, trying to put her in the stroller, and I'm just physically putting her in the stroller, putting her down, using an elbow to try to get the strap across. I'm sweating. I am stressed beyond belief. This is miserable. I'm like, "Just get in the stroller. Just get in the stroller," this terrible, terrible interaction. People are staring. It was ugly.

Then I stopped, thought for a second, and said, "What do you want," and she said, "Walk." I said, "Okay, first ride, then walk." She sat down in the stroller. It was over. It was a miracle. It wasn't a miracle, it was the beauty of ABA and using this principle. She knew the first/then language, because we used it all the time. "First buckle in your car seat, then you get toys," so every time I buckled her, I gave her toys to play with in the car. She knew that if she did that first behavior, I would give her the then, and so this super stressful situation, when I was ready to just call it quits and go spend a day in hotel room with an 18-month-old, which also sounds awful and no fun. I was ready to quit, and then I thankfully remembered my training, and now you're getting some training that you can remember.

Okay, what is it that she wants? What is the then? What is the reinforcer for her? She just wants to walk. She just wants some freedom. She didn't need ice cream. She didn't need toys and treats and all these other things. She wanted to walk. First, ride in your stroller, then walk. It was first ride, then walk, and she sits down, and then I explained to her again, "First ride to the penguins, then you can get out and walk," and I give her a little more words, a little more language, now that we've both calmed down. No one is crying anymore, at least not the two of us. Other people watching us may have been disturbed. We were good, and we had a fantastic rest of the day together.

After every exhibit, we'd go and get out and see the penguins, or whatever it was. I don't remember if they had penguins at that zoo, but we would go and see whatever animal it was, and I would say, "Okay, it's time to ride," and if she had a moment where she was starting to balk, and be like, "Mm-mm (negative), I'm not getting in that stroller," I'd say, "First ride, then walk." She knew that I was going to follow through, that as long as she rode in that stroller to the next animal to see, I would unbuckle her and let her out and let her walk again.

It works. It works to prevent problem behavior. It works to stop the problem behavior, as long as you are clear and direct. First, do whatever you need to do. I could have said, "First, get in the stroller, and I will buckle you up, and you will ride and I'll push you, and you're not old enough to walk, and then the zoo is too big." First ride. That was it. Especially with little kids, they don't need all those extra words. They're not listening. Especially with your older kids who are already irritated and getting amped up, they're not listening to all those extra words. That's not helping anything. First ride, then walk. Four words.

I followed through. The reinforcement was good for her, In that moment, that's what she wanted, and I followed through immediately, just like with positive reinforcement. It's got to be immediate. I gave her something good, I gave it to her only if she did the first behavior.

It's super easy to just start using the vocabulary. First/then, first/then, and a lot of times, we use it like, "First buckle, then toys." We use it with my infant now. That doesn't mean she's fussing every time we get in the car, it's just kind of become our routine, and then when she is in a harder situation, like at the zoo, she knows what those words mean, and she knows that I'm going to follow through. She can trust that mom's going to give her to good stuff, whatever that is, right then. If it's freedom to walk, she can trust that. She is used to the first/then.

It sounds so easy. Just use first/then. Try it and see if you can prevent some problems. That's what it's about. Prevent the problem behaviors. You know when those problems are. You know that it's every morning getting ready for school, because everybody is rushed. Mornings are hard, so you throw in some reinforcement in there somewhere. "You know, if you put your shoes on with me only having to ask you once, what would you like as a reward?" Well, maybe they just want to take something in the car. Maybe they want to

listen to something you haven't thought about on the radio in the car on the way to school. Think about rewards that you can do easily.

"First, shoes on, then pick the music." Whatever it takes. Use it when it's hard. Use it when it's not hard, so they're used to that language. They're used to that "first/then, first/then," and it's a happy and positive upbeat thing, so try it this week. We'll dig into a little bit more details and more examples right now too, to help you really understand it and then apply it with your own family.

All right. The Premack Principle. Let's get into this, and it's also called Grandma's Rule, which might be an easier way to remember it, or I know some people see the word principle and think, Oh, this is too technical, I'm not going to learn that. So, let's just call it Grandma's Rule, and we'll get some definitions and some examples and really, hopefully, you can come up with some really good ideas of how to use this yourself.

What is Grandma's Rule or the Premack Principle? First/then. All right. You got it. That's it. First do the task, and then give them some reinforcement. That really is it. First, do what I need you to do, then you get some reinforcement. First/then. So, "First, eat your vegetables, and then you have dessert." That's why it's called Grandma's Rule. That sounds like such a grandma thing, but you say out loud this contingency in place. You don't just think to yourself, well, if my kid eats some vegetables, maybe I'll give him some dessert. You tell them what's going on.

The first is the task at hand. What's the job? What do you need them to do? What is that physical behavior? What's the target behavior? And the then is the reinforcer, or the reward. What are you going to give your kid for doing the first? What are you going to give them as soon as they complete the task? Thinking back to your lesson on positive reinforcement, something that's good that will increase the frequency of them doing the first. The first is the unfun thing, the then is the fun thing.

This is not just narrating your life. "First brush your teeth, then get dressed for school. First put your socks on, then put your shoes on." No, it's not a list. It's not steps to things to do. It's "First, do the behavior I need you to do, and then I will give you something for it. I will reward you for it."

It's also called a low frequency behavior. Your first is the low frequency behavior, and that means something that's not happening, something that you need to see more of, something that you need your kiddo to do for you more often, and the then is a high frequency behavior, and that is something that they like to do, so they do it a lot. That's something fun and exciting and happy. The low frequency behavior is just a chore. It's something that has to happen, and the then is something that you like.

You probably do this all the time. I think we all do it for ourselves, and you probably don't say it out loud to yourself, and you probably don't call it the Premack Principle, but first eat

all your healthy foods, then you can have a sweet treat. First get to a stopping place on your work project, then you can go for a coffee break. First go to the gym. Get up in the morning and go work out, so that after work you can go to happy hour. We reward ourselves for doing the things that we have to do. We build in little rewards for ourselves in our day, little breaks and little things, but we make ourselves do the unfun stuff first. You allow yourself to earn these rewards.

It's the same thing with our kiddos. We want them to be able to earn a reward by engaging in that first behavior. We don't keep it to ourselves. Say it out loud. Tell your kiddo. What do you need them to do? The first/then as your whole sentence helps you to be clear, direct, and specific, and it helps you to not lecture and give them this whole long lecture about what you need them to do. Just tell them, "First put your shoes on, then you can pick the music we're going to listen to on the way to school."

You can use it in the moment, and that's my example that I always share about going to the zoo. When something is happening in the moment and you just say, "Well, what do you want?" Okay, your kiddo tells you what they want, then you say, "Oh, okay. First, do this thing I need you to do, and then I'll give you that thing that you want." If your kiddo says they want screen time and you're trying to get out the door to school, "Well, I can't give you screen time right now, but you can have it after school or you can choose a special book to take in the car," or something like that.

Make it a routine. Say it every time. "I have little [bitties 00:13:33], so we have to get in the car seat, so first buckle, then toys." It's something we say all the time. First buckle, then I'll pass them a toy, something to play with. My almost four-year-old now says it to the baby. I start putting her in the car, and she says, "First buckle, then toys," and she waits till I get the little one buckled and hands her toys.

It's a routine. It's something that just comes out. "First diaper, then you can get up off the changing table." "First homework, then you get your screen time." That's probably built into your after-school plans, but you need to say it out loud, and make sure they know that you are going to give them that reward for doing the unfun thing, the homework. First dinner, then dessert. First chores, then you get to do your free time, whatever that is for your kiddo.

You can also make it visual. You can use pictures for things that you find yourself saying, "First/then" over and over and over again, so, "First brush your teeth, and then you can read at bed time." "First eat your vegetables and then dessert." That's kind of an obvious item, one that we keep using. "First do your chores, then you get screen time." If you're having to say this all the time, then make a little visual. Print out some pictures from the internet, and make something cute that you can just point to, and cut out some of that dialogue.

Using this consistent language of first/then lets your child know that something good is coming, and they do have some control over the situation, so if you want that screen time, you can choose to do the chores. That's up to you if you want the screen time or not. You don't do your chores, there's no screen time. That's a choice that you can make. You have some control over the situation. Mom's not just a dictator here and making you do the chores. If they want that then, and hopefully they do offer some good rewards, then they will choose to engage in the first behavior, and that unfun thing that needs to happen.

So, what if it's not working? What do we do? I spoke to a moms group and I used the First Buckled In books was what I said, because my daughter at the time was really into books, and so we had little soft books in the car, put her in her car seat and gave her books. Worked. She loved books. Spoke to a moms group, used that example, and I mean, months later a mom told me, "Well, it doesn't work. The first/then doesn't work. I've been saying, 'First buckle, then books,' all this time, and it's just terrible. I can't get my kid in the car." I said, "Well, does your kid love books?" She said, "No." Then it's not a reinforcer for that kid. Your then isn't good enough for that kiddo. Books was not reinforcing. He wasn't into that.

Find something that they want. The then needs to be good. The then is supposed to be reinforcing, and so we learned in our lesson on positive reinforcement that if it is a reinforcer, if it is positive reinforcement, by definition, that behavior has to get stronger. It has to increase in the future. Make sure your then is something the kid wants to earn. Ask him. Ask him right then. Especially if they're older, you don't need to be dictating all of their rewards. Ask them right then, "Well, if you do your chores, what do you want to do afterward? What do you want to do today?" You never know what they're going to come up with.

A lot of times, my own child, who's still little, will come up with rewards that are cheaper and easier than anything I was thinking of, and so giving her a chance to come up with these ideas is fantastic on all accounts. Just ask him, and then try different things. It doesn't always have to be first chores, then screen time; first buckle, then toys. Change it up on them and make sure it's something that they wanted and that is powerful enough to make them engage in that first behavior.

No matter what we're talking about, no matter what lessons we're going to work on here, follow through, follow through, follow through. Be consistent. We've got to be consistent and stick to our guns with these things, so only offer then activities that you are willing and able to give right away. We've talked about positive reinforcement. The more immediate, the better. As soon as possible.

If you ask your kiddo, "What do you want," and they say, "Ice cream," and you say, "First get in the car, and then you can have ice cream," I'm not giving my children ice cream in the car, at least not very often, so that's not a good then. "First buckle, and then ice cream after dinner tonight," well, that's way too late, so what can you offer them right then that they actually want? You always have to give the then. You can't say, "First do your chores, and

then screen time," and then be like, "Oh, I forgot, we got to go to the grocery store," and they don't get their reward. You got to figure out how to get them that reward on the way to grocery store, or you wait and you go to the grocery store 10 minutes later. You have to follow through.

If you offer them that then, give it to them. Being consistent is how we teach trust. When you think of, what does trust mean? When I trust a friend of mine, I trust that they are going to do what they say they're going to do. I know that if friend A says, "I will be at your house at 4 o'clock," she's going to be at my house somewhere around 4 o'clock. If they have kids, you know they might be a little late, but I trust that they're going to show up and they're not just going to blow me off. You trust that someone's going to follow through on what they say, and that's the same thing that we're teaching our kiddos, that we're modeling for them.

If we say, "First/then," and we don't give the then, you're teaching your kiddo that you're not trustworthy. You're modeling that it's okay to not do what you said you were going to do, to not follow through, to not honor your words. So, making sure that before you offer something, that you're going to give it and that you're going to give it right away, so that the reinforcer that you have is available, and you can physically make this happen for your kiddo for engaging in the desired behavior. We're modeling trust. We're teaching them to trust us, and we're building that rapport with our kiddos, which having that strong relationship is so important to us as parents.

Your first/then. First, low frequency behavior, unfun task, the job at hand, the request, something you've asked your kiddo to do. Do the task, and then you get something awesome. You get a high frequency behavior, something you choose to do, something you want to do, something that's reinforcing. Don't just think this in your head. Don't just think about giving your kiddo some reinforcement. I mean, do think, that's a good thing to think, but say it out loud. Tell them. Get to the point. "First do your homework, then free time," not a whole long thing about, "Well, your teacher told me you haven't been doing your homework, and you're distracted in class, and you need to do blah ..." They don't want to hear that. "First do your homework, then you can have free time."

Always follow through, no matter what you're working on. Any time you offer your kiddo a reinforcer, give it to them when they earn it. Help them to earn it and give it to them when they earn it.