

Don't Force the Hug:

Letting Kids Show Affection on Their Terms

Amanda had a doctor appointment, so she took her two kids, Lucas and Mia, over to her mom's house to spend a few hours. When she picked them up, her kids were excited to tell her about all of the fun things they did. As they were saying goodbye, grandma said, "I love having you come over! Give me a hug before you go." Lucas excitedly ran over to grandma and gave her a big hug. Mia hung back a little. Grandma said, "Come on, Mia. I don't want to miss my hug."

How should Amanda respond?

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Spend some time thinking about how you would respond in this situation. Discuss your responses with a partner, co-parent, or trusted friend.

- If you were Mia's parent, what would you say to her? What would you say to grandma?
- If you make Mia hug grandma, what might Mia learn from this situation?
- If you don't make Mia hug grandma, how could it impact the situation?
- How can you empower Mia but still make grandma feel loved and appreciated?

HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

1. Give your child options.

Kids can show affection in lots of different ways. Grandma might ask for a hug, but you could suggest a high five or blowing kisses.

2. Explain to family and friends.

Letting a child choose to show affection might be new to grandma. Communicate that it's important your child feels comfortable expressing preferences.

3. Reinforce respect.

Choosing how they show affection isn't an excuse for kids to be rude. Make sure that they express themselves respectfully.

4. Talk to your child about their right to choose.

Sit down with them before situations occur and let them know that you'll give them choices and respect their decision.

5. Encourage nonphysical love.

Your child may have their own way of showing love: giving someone a drawing, singing a song. Let them show affection in varied ways.

HAVE A CONVERSATION:

Spend some time having a conversation with your child about how they prefer to show affection. Here are some questions you could ask.

- How do you like to show people in our family that you love them?
- Have you ever been uncomfortable interacting with our family and friends?
- What can I do to make you feel safe and comfortable when we're around other people?