

just say **yes**



Susannah, 4, is no stranger to the word no. So imagine her shock upon hearing her mom utter a stream of yeses.

## What would happen if, for one week, you said yes to your child's (nearly) every request? One mom finds out.

BY SANDRA TSING LOH    PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAMARA MUTH-KING

I'm not going to sugarcoat this, and anyway, I don't know the politically correct wording. The fact is, I have an impossible 4-year-old. For the record, my older daughter, Madeline, has turned out beautifully. A proud kindergartener, Madeline trots off to school in the morning with her neat princess backpack. In the afternoon she returns with elaborate lectures to the family about the rhyming of *-at* words and the wonders of healthy food. Meanwhile, in the background, little Susannah is stag leaping (*aiiee!!!*) through the house in scarves she has made of toilet paper. In the bathtub she is shampooing and brushing her pink fuzzy unicorn with my hairbrush (*eeew*). In a hurry to get dressed one morning, I discover that Susannah has unscrewed all the knobs from my dresser drawers and hidden them around the bedroom as a treasure hunt. It's like living with a raccoon.

And God forbid you actually tell her *not* to do something. The other weekend, at a barbecue thrown by a childless couple, my thought was to comfortably sequester my girls in the master bedroom with its giant TV, kid videos I'd brought in, and a gently whirling fan over the bed. Which for some complicated kitty litter/old electrical wiring/air circulatory reason could not be turned off. Plumping pillows, I told the kids: "Please don't jump on the bed." I turned to insert the video and upon turning ►



Unlimited TV  
viewing, yes!

## “Yes?” The word actually tastes dangerous.

back around saw Susannah hopping, hopping, hopping on the bed. “Just little jumps,” she said. “Not very high.” Then she flung her arms up and, with a big grin, took a sudden giant leap toward the fan. I screamed.

As a result of our girls’ yin-yang duality, our parental disciplinary style has evolved along two tracks. Madeline—Princess Fragilina—collapses into tears upon being corrected, mostly, I think, in the shock and embarrassment of the A student being awarded a B. My husband and I cannot believe the evasions that come out of our mouths. “It’s not that I’m angry,” Mike will murmur, in a voice so indoors it’s practically in its own pillowy alcove. “It’s just that while I’m eating, your sudden shrieks startle me.” When, through gusty sobs, Madeline explains that she shrieked only because they were playing the running game, I’ll intone with gentle Buddhist wisdom: “Well, then, let’s look at that. Perhaps it’s the running game that’s to blame.” By contrast, here’s a typical speech to Susannah: “NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! If you don’t get down off that wall NOW, my friend,

I PROMISE you you’re going to FALL, crack your SKULL open, eyeballs are going to go rolling EVERYWHERE, and you know what your father and I will be doing? LAUGHING. We’re going to be just standing here LAUGHING. Do you even HEAR me? NO!”

Recently my friend Gail, upon witnessing one of my distinctly non-Hallmark moments, asked me a curious question. She wanted to know if I’d ever counted how many times in a day I say no to Susannah. (Gail is a child psychologist and a grandmother.) “I would just invite you,” Gail says, in her trademark mellifluous tone that instantly calms, “to try one week of just saying yes to Susannah.”

“Yes?” I repeat. The word actually tastes dangerous. “Saying yes to Susannah?” I picture it and feel a tightening in my chest. “It would be like releasing her so she can sprint right onto the freeway!”

“Well, don’t do that,” Gail replies sensibly. “But with every other request, instead of that automatic no, just put a yes there. See what happens.”

### Monday morning

Well, all right. Saying yes—it’s just for a week. So the morning begins as usual. Maddy’s already off to school, I’m toasting a waffle, and Susannah is busily rummaging around for the Kitty Cat Glitter Blouse and the Pleated Red Skirt (KCGBATPRS). It’s her school uniform. Of course, Susannah is the only kid there who has a school uniform. All the other preschoolers vary their outfits.

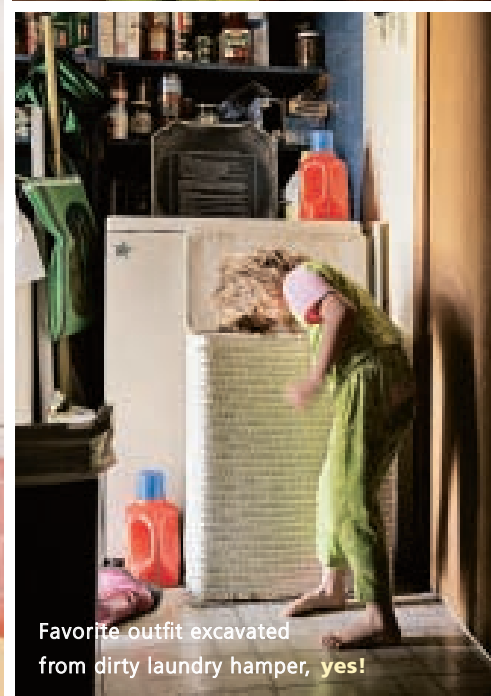
Normally, I’d say no to the dreaded KCGBATPRS combination because it is in the laundry hamper, and she and I ►



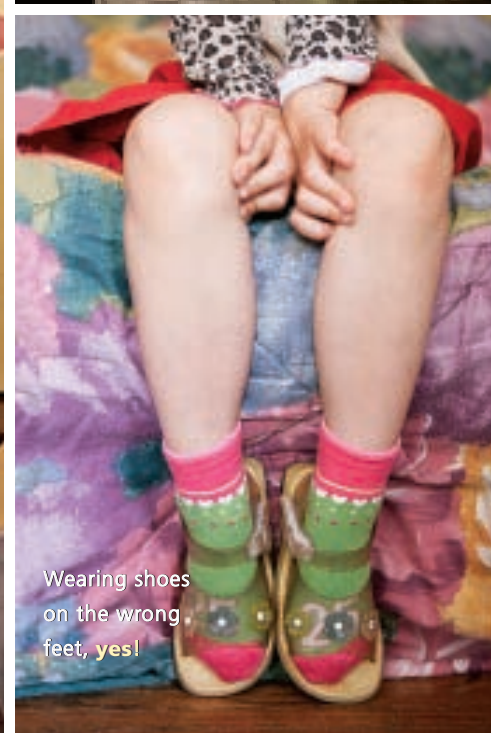
A cling-on escapes from preschool, yes!



Clean undies, always a yes



Favorite outfit excavated from dirty laundry hamper, yes!



Wearing shoes on the wrong feet, yes!



Standing on chairs, **yes!**



Wielding a knife, **yes!**



Going to the grocery store for candy, **yes!**

would man our usual battle stations, doing our 8 a.m. tug-of-war on legs and arms and sleeves, but not today. Which is to say, **Yes.** (Ouch!) I allow my daughter to go to preschool wearing clothes excavated from the dirty laundry, along with sandals on the wrong feet (Velcro on the inside is what feels “natural” to Susannah). It’s painful, but I do this without argument, and I suppose the only thing harmed is my ego. (I could always send a mass e-mail to the other parents: “For the record, we *do* own a washing machine. And yes, we *have* bought Susannah other clothes. Photos of cute alternate outfits she will never wear are attached. Enjoy.”)

### Tuesday morning

Standing with her lunchbox in front of her classroom, with its colorful toys and cheerful mobiles, Susannah suddenly wavers, turns to me, and . . . oh no, here it comes. All year these preschoolers have barreled kamikazelike onto the circle rug, flinging lunchboxes into cubbies with nary a backward glance. But recently, for some unknown reason, like drooping leaves, they’ve all caught clingy disease. The doorway is crowded with lumbering two-headed, four-legged parent/child beings grappling, pleading, weeping. “I don’t want to go to school, Mommy,” Susannah whispers breathily in my ear. “I want to come with youuuu.” “Well—all righty, then!” I reply, sweeping her up. **Yes.**

In slow motion, a sea of parents’ and children’s heads bob up in a kind of disbelief. I do feel like a betrayer. We parents all know—we’ve literally seen through the glass—that within two minutes of leaving them, our children

forget us. Plus, they’re in group training for real school next year, where attendance isn’t so optional. On the other hand, it’s just for a day. Okay, in point of fact, it turns out to be four days—Tuesday through Friday.

### Wednesday morning

Here’s the deal we strike—a deal which, I grant you, is possible only for mothers who work at home. If Susannah is going to insist on playing hooky day after day, I’ll be resetting the mommy-and-me bar low, waaay low. There will be (yes, here comes a . . .) **No** more unending teeny-tiny-doll tea parties together. Spend whole days with your mom instead of at preschool, and you’re going to get quantity time, not quality time.

“Staying home with me is not going to be fun,” I warn, “because today I have *errands.*” But here’s the thing. My kid knows she’s getting away with murder. And now she and her mom are driving off together once again, which, for a little girl who has always been the lesser half of a two-pack, feels pink-unicorn special.

Grocery shopping is actually fun with my suddenly sunny and helpful companion. Susannah rummages through the fruit section for me (see—now it’s *purposeful* rummaging) to pick out the most beautiful red apples. I’m warmed by a recollection of myself, in the ‘60s, in my mother’s grocery cart, riding shotgun with the beef brisket. Poor-quality time with cholesterol-rich food from the frozen-meat section—such happy memories.

### Thursday morning

Again with the preschool hooky. And there were probably other new horrific yeses I don’t remember.

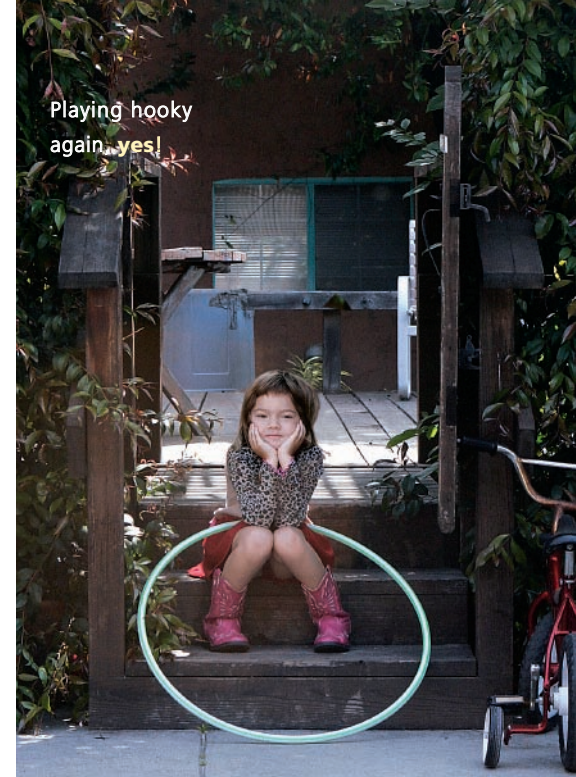
At 4, I need to give her room to spread her wings a little.

### Friday afternoon

How long can a 4-year-old lounge pasha-like on pillows watching television without growing restless? The answer is 3 hours and 45 minutes (**Yes**) before they begin to get peckish. That's the secret to limiting television time—don't feed them!

Also, by now Susannah has been watching TV for so long, we've rounded the horn of noon, meaning the familiar harbors of *JoJo's Circus* and *Dragon Tales* have given way to more obscure shows starring unfamiliar rabbits in grating colors and bickering sock puppets from Canada. (And indeed, by next week, even preschool sounds interesting again—given that it is full of kids, painting, songs, bugs, fun, and even a rabbit. A live one!)

Having achieved television boredom, Susannah is now fixated on the idea of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Making one. Before I know it, a knife is out. But I force myself to relax—**Yes**. (It's a butter knife, so unless she actually plunges it into her own eye . . .) Finally, I let her do what she's always begging to do—make her own sandwich with an actual knife for smearing, spreading, jabbing. It takes her almost 20 minutes (not a bad thing when you're trying to fill the day), and it's a bit asymmetrical, but the whole time, Susannah is wonderfully engrossed. She devours her wobbly masterpiece to the last crumb.



Playing hooky again...yes!

### Saturday morning

How much candy can a child actually consume? **Yes again**. It depends on the form it takes, and how much stamina she has for it. At the grocery store, I let Susannah pick out some candy, and she chooses a strange treat where you poke a stick into some purple sugary powder and then lick it. Stick, lick, stick, lick. It's fun but a lot of work. In the end she barely finishes half. Moral: Encourage candy that requires diligence.

### Sunday evening

So here's what I've learned after my week of turning no to yes. The first is that while Susannah is *my* baby, she is no longer a baby. At 4, I need to give her room to spread her wings a little—to explore, play with a more varied set of tools (like a butter knife). Frustration builds when you cut curious children off before they even start.

I have to practice that *Finding Nemo*-esque Zen of letting my daughter probe a little farther out in the ocean than I might like. In the week to come, she will get her fingertip stuck in the horizontal sliding bedroom window (which she was experimenting with). It won't ►



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be quite the dramatically cracked skull and rolling eyeballs I've always promised, but she will wail, get a bandage, the finger will end up fine . . . and oh, miracle of miracles, she won't go near that window again. Our Scooby Doo mini-bandage moment ends up saving hours of emotional wear and tear, and unlike my usual firehose stream of no's, will be effective.

The second value of occasionally switching from no to yes is to vary the day's rhythm, especially in those crankalicious doldrums of early evening. Over our week of yes, a vigorous late-afternoon installment of the running game (fueled by, yes, ice cream . . . for all of us!) drew—surprise—an accidental hit in the stomach. “Get Maddy!” Susannah howled. “Get her!” “Okay, honey,” I said in my gentle Buddhist voice. “You want me to ‘get’ her. Should I go punch her right now? In the nose? Fast punch? Slow punch? Three punches—boom-boom-boom?” Now we're both giggling and she's forgotten what she was mad about.

Which brings us to the eternal magic bullet of paying extra attention and

taking extra time. After our week of yes, I came to realize how often my no comes because I'm trying to make the quickest progress from point A to point B, whereas my 4-year-old wants to noodle down the garden path toward points C, D . . . maybe even Q.

For Susannah, there are no straight-ahead tasks—everything is open to interpretation, a challenge, a puzzle, a game. She loves playful engagement. And so, regarding the ever problematic getting-dressed-in-the-morning issue, Susannah and I have developed a routine we call “I pick, you pick.” Like a palace valet, I bring three choices of everything—tops, bottoms, socks, shoes. Susannah whispers to me which one I should pick. I point and say loudly (and bossily), “I pick the blue socks!” She retorts, “I pick the pink!” We laugh hysterically, then she picks up the pink socks and puts them on. The whole thing takes 90 seconds.

As for the dreaded television (and computer games), the fact is, at this age anyway, they prefer the company of their parents. Indeed, right now someone's tugging on my leg for a game of Strawberry Shortcake rummy, which, frankly, I loathe. The rules change every minute, there's a lot of weeping, and all the pink cards seem mysteriously sticky.

But my girls won't be this small forever. One day they will be teens, dead set on avoiding us. One day I will miss our endlessly unfolding days together—even the poor quality time of, if not grocery shopping for frozen brisket, Strawberry Shortcake rummy.

At the same time, for this Sunday night moment, fortunately . . . Yes! Here comes their dad. ●●

Sandra Tsing Loh writes humorous memoirs (*A Year in Van Nuys*), scores music for film, performs in one-woman shows, and, now, says yes to her girls whenever possible.