

The **WAY** we talk to our kids has a huge impact on their **learning** and ability to **listen** to us.



We are constantly modeling to our kids how to act and behave and the way we talk to them fits right into this category. The way we speak to them and those around us is showing them how we want them to speak back to us.

I have found that there are generally three different ways that parents communicate with their kids. The first one is in an aggressive way. These parents yell a lot, put their kids down and use attacking words. Their children respond in many different ways, mainly by playing up a lot more, feeling fearful, yelling back and ignoring their parents' constant orders.

The second form of communication commonly seen is a passive form. These parents mutter soft, cautious words and tones to their kids finding that they run riot and walk all over them. Unfortunately these parents are so passive that sometimes when they are pushed to their limits, they suddenly turn their communication into an aggressive tone.

Lastly the third way that parents can communicate with their kids is in an assertive way. This is what I have found to be by far the most effective way to communicate with kids at all levels. An assertive way of communicating is firm, consistent, clear, positive, warm and confident. Communicating with kids in an assertive way is a real skill yet it shows your kids that mum and dad know what they're going on about and to listen.

Here are my 20 top tips for improving the WAY we talk to our kids:

1. **Use your child's name.** Your own name is music to your ears. Our kids are no different, plus it helps to get their attention before delivering your message. eg "George, please go and get.....". Young children can often only concentrate on one thing at a time. Call your child's name until you have their attention before you speak. Eg "Helen". (Wait until she stops kicking the ball and looks at you.) "Lunch will be ready in ten minutes".
1. **Use positive language**– try not to be saying "no" or "don't" all of the time. There is no doubt that if we say "Don't drop that glass" or "No running inside" or "Don't drag your coat in the dirt" your child has that image and thought imbedded in their mind and more times than not, they will drop the glass! Instead, try to word what you want them to do. Eg "Only walking inside please" or "Hold onto that glass, it is a special one" or "Hold the coat up so it doesn't drag". This requires much thought and practice but is well worth the effort.

Try to eliminate words you use that may be ridiculing ("You're being a big baby."), name-calling ("You're a really bad boy."), and shaming ("I was so ashamed of you today"). This type of language achieves very little except leaving your child feeling worthless. Kids will often cut off communication with those who use these words with them and begin to develop a poor self-concept.

Positive and kind words give your child more confidence, makes them feel happier, helps them behave better, encourages them to try hard and achieve success. They learn to imitate you and deliver the same respect and praise to others.

Examples of positive words are: "I like to way you remembered to pack up your toys", "Thank you for helping me clean up this mess", "You tried so hard to share your things with your sister, it made me feel really happy".

1. **Connect with your child** with eye contact. You may need to get down to their level or sit at the table with them. When you are chatting with your kids, this shows them also what they should do. Not only

is it good manners, it helps you to listen to each other. Say your child's name until you get their eye contact, especially before giving them a direction. It is important that they give you their attention, and you should model the same behaviour for them.

1. **Use volume appropriately** – When in the classroom teaching, I used to have a class next door to me whose teacher always yelled. The kids used to put in their earplugs and eventually stopped listening at all. The teacher was always trying to yell over the noise of the kids, what a nightmare!

The same applies for at home, don't ever compete with a yelling child. When they have calmed down, then talk. If you use the volume of your voice appropriately for the majority of the time, raising your voice in an urgent situation should not be ignored. They will sit up and take notice because it doesn't happen all of the time.

Yelling orders or directions from another room may also fall on deaf ears after a while, for example yelling "Turn off the TV now please Chad" or "Hurry up and get dressed" from the kitchen gives the impression that you're busy and not too serious.

Walking into the room, joining in for a minute or two and waiting for the commercial break will go down with far more cooperation. You are modelling respectful behaviour to start with and you have come to them with your direction, so they know you mean it!

5. **Suggest options and alternatives** – When you want your kids to cooperate with you, it is far easier if they can understand why they need them to do something and how it is to their advantage to do so. They need to see the importance of following your directions.

For example, "When you get dressed, you may go outside with Daddy", "Which jumper would you like to put on, the red one or the blue one?", "When you do your homework, you can then watch tv", "Which book would you like to read, this one or that one?" "When you are dressed for school, you may then play with your toys".

By adopting words like "when" and "which" makes the child feel as though they have choices, even though there is no room for negotiation. This works far better than using "if" words.

Also, try to include your child in helping you solve a problem. For example, instead of saying "Don't leave your toy trucks out there", try saying "George, think about where you should store your toy trucks so they're in a safe place, come and tell me when you've decided on a good spot."

Try to offer alternatives rather than saying a straight out "no" or "don't". For example "You can't get the paints out just now, but you could draw with the crayons instead".

6. **Keep it simple** – Young kids have trouble following too many directions given at once. We can probably relate to that when we ask someone for directions to a destination and are bombarded with instructions we later forget.

Try to stagger your requests into small blocks. Eg instead of saying, "Helen, go and pack up your toys, but first put your dirty shoes outside and then feed the cat". Chances are, Helen will feed the cat then go outside to play because feeding the cat is the last thing she remembers you asking.

Even though we want to improve our communication with our kids, be preceptive to their level of interest in the conversation. If they are getting the blank stare, call it quits. If you feel as though you're waffling on, try to use a more direct approach next time you visit the subject.

7. **Keep away from nagging** – At the end of each school day, I wanted the children in my class to tidy the room before home time. I felt that they should learn to tidy up after themselves and take pride in their room. I knew that if I went around asking each child to pick up their rubbish, wipe their desks, empty the rubbish bins,

and clean the sink nothing would get done.

So I created a job chart. Each job had a child's name next to it and I showed it to them at the start of each week. I would rotate the jobs weekly to avoid monotony. I explained that five minutes before home time each day it would be "job time". Just before the bell, I would walk around the room and pick which job or jobs were completed to perfection. That child or children would receive a bonus or prize. My room was immaculate each day and I hardly had to say a thing!

This can work well at home too. Either writing things down or having a chart with incentives in place, eliminate lots of nagging. It is important to make sure you recognise and praise effort, and reward desired behaviour.

Try to set a time where kids know what is expected. They thrive on routines. For example, set a time to do their chores in the afternoons. When they are playing they don't like to be interrupted, just as much as we don't when reading a good book. If they know *what* is expected and *when* you shouldn't have to nag all of the time.

8. Model and expect good manners – Good manners at home or anywhere shouldn't be optional. If you model good manners to your children and everyone else, they will see that good manners is expected and displayed on a consistent level. Start teaching your children to say the basics like "please" and "thank you" before they can talk.

Children deserve the common courtesy of manners that adults use with each other. They will often imitate the speech and behaviour of their parents and carers. Say "please", "thank you" and "you're welcome" to your kids as you would anyone else.

9. Be gentle but firm – if you have made your decision about something, stick to it. Make sure you and your partner agree on the issue and stay united on your decision.

Your kids may not like the decision at the time, but they will know it stands firm and won't bother persisting with either of you or playing one parent off against the other.

Make your requests important and speak as though you mean it. Requesting made in a wishy-washy tone gives kids the impression you are not that concerned whether they follow your request or not.

10. Ask open-ended questions – If you want to get your kids to think more and open their minds, you need to ask them open-ended questions. That is, questions that are not answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer. They are invitations to say more, and share their ideas and feelings.

For example, instead of asking "Did you enjoy Peter's party today?" you could ask "What was the best part of Peter's party today?"

Respond to their ideas to show them you are interested in what they have to say and that they are important to you eg "Really?", "I understand." "What about..." "That is interesting".

11. Check for understanding – if you find that your child is not responding to your requests or getting confused by your instructions or conversations, remember to check for their understanding before moving on to the next topic.

Ask them to repeat what you have said. If they can't, you know that it is too long or complicated for them to understand. Try to rephrase your choice of words with shorter and simpler sentences.

12. Explain what you want with "I" messages – When asking your child to do something, you will receive a greater response by explaining what you want in terms of thoughts and feelings by sending "I messages". This is far more effective than using orders or sending "you messages".

It lets your child know how their behavior makes you feel. Kids sometimes don't consider how their behaviour

will affect others. By using this strategy, it may help them give more consideration to their actions and it gives them more responsibility to change their behavior.

For example “I would like you to come over here please” instead of “Come over here” or “I would like you to give Oliver a turn please” instead of “Give Oliver a turn!” It is a softer approach and children who are willing to please will respond to this type of language.

Explaining how you feel also helps kids to see why they should comply. For example “When you run away from mummy in the store I feel worried because you could get lost”. Use “when you.... I feel...because....” words.

13. **Give notice** – If your child is fully engrossed with something or an activity and it is time to move on or leave. Give them some advance warning so they get used to the idea. For example “George, it is nearly time to go. Start saying good-bye to the puppy please”.

14. **Use enquiry-based listening** – Show your kids that they have your full attention and you care enough to listen to them. Reading the paper, vacuuming and working on the computer are too distracting to give your kids your full attention.

If you really cannot talk at that point, don't pretend to be listening. Promise them a time when you can listen and be sure to follow through.

Show that you are interested in what they have to say by using inquiry based listening. This is when you respond to them with words that encourage more conversation. For example “Sounds like you're saying.....” Or “How did that make you feel?” or “Do you mean.....?”

15. **Make time for one-on-one conversations** – This is especially important if there is quite an age gap between your kids. Sometimes older siblings talk over the top of the younger ones, and sometimes the younger ones just prefer to let the older siblings do all the talking.

Conversations with older siblings can sometimes be over and above the younger kids level of communication. Plus older siblings require stimulating conversations where they can learn and inquire for more information.

Therefore, try to get some one-to-one time with your siblings alone at different times so you can really talk at their level and use appropriate vocabulary. It might just be while walking to the park, reading a book together before bed, or driving to get an ice cream. It doesn't have to be structured time, but make quality use of opportunities as they arise.

16. **Don't sweat the small stuff.** By all means, enforce your serious rules firmly, but try not to sweat the small stuff. Often times kids will tune out from listening to their parents if they tend to lecture over little things a lot.

For example, telling your child what they “ought” to be doing all the time will eventually fall on deaf ears. They are not thinking for themselves what they ought to be doing because they are always being told.

For example, instead of saying, “You must listen to your teacher at school, or else you won't understand”. Try to use an approach where they can think for themselves what they should do. Use inquiry based questioning such as “What do you find hard to understand at school? Why do you think you find this difficult? What could you do in class to learn more from your teacher?”

With this approach you are able to have a more connected discussion where the child has to think of a resolution and strategy for improving their behavior or problem. When you do need to enforce a more serious rule that is not negotiable, your kids are more likely to listen.

17. **Be considerate.** Think about the way that you talk to your friends. Then think about the way you speak

to your kids. Is it with the same consideration and tone? More wonderful relationships with kids would develop if adults gave as much thought and consideration talking to their kids as they do when talking to their friends.

18. **Show acceptance.** When you show your kids that you accept and love them just the way they are despite their differences, they will be more likely to share their feelings and problems with you. They will know that as they grow and change, you will be there for them no matter what.

We do not have to accept inappropriate behavior such as violence or teasing. We can however accept and love our kids as they are by their character, personality and individual interests.

For example: Oliver says "Mum, I am feeling scared to go to bed". A response to *encourage* more communication would be:

"That's okay Oliver. I will leave the door open and turn on your night light. I will pop in later to check on you".

A *poor* response would be:

"Don't be a big cry baby Oliver. You're old enough to know better than that. Only baby boys get scared!"

19. **Don't interrupt.** Try not to interrupt or scold your kids when they are telling you a story. Kids will lose interest in sharing their feelings with you if you shift away from their story and use the time to teach them a lesson.

For example, Henry came home really excited from Sally's place and started to tell his mother all about the great time he had playing down by the dam. His mother rudely interrupted his story and began to lecture him on the dangers of playing around water. Henry didn't finish his story and thought twice about sharing his experiences with his mother the next time.

Henry's mother certainly should remind him of the rule about playing near water and ensuring there is an adult present, but at another time or at least when he has finished his story.

20. **Make conversation a priority with your kids.** Open and comfortable communication with your kids develops confidence, self-esteem, good relationships with others, cooperation and warm relationships with you. Take the time and effort to foster your relationship and communication skills by talking with your kids as much as you can.

Remember that talking *with* kids is a two way street. Talk with them and then hear what they have to say. Listening is just as important as talking.