References

Frankel, V. (2003). How to talk to your child so he'll really listen. *Parenting*, *17*(1), 92.

How to talk to your child so he'll really listen

The jewellike moments of parenthood--when you and your lovelies sit quietly on the couch, talking about, say, the texture of marshmallows--are often sandwiched between madness and mayhem. The kids break rules and sometimes objects, to say nothing of a parent's patience. And although moms and dads throw around a lot of words, children rarely pay heed when you tell them what to do. Most of my requests (gentle or otherwise) for behavioral modification seem to be ignored or met with resistance. "In two-to seven-year-olds, ignoring commands gives kids a feeling of power," says Thomas Phelan, Ph.D., a child psychologist in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and author of 1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12. "Noncompliance is also a way to test boundaries, get attention, and make an impact."

By "impact," Phelan means that children will purposely attempt to upset you and make your face turn the color of freshly spewed lava.

But putting an end to all this is easier than most of us realize. It mainly involves telling our kids what to do in a new way. "Adults use a communication style that takes decades to acquire and perfect," says child psychiatrist Denis Donovan, M.D., coauthor of What Did I Just Say!?! "If parents try to reason with their children, or use subtle irony, the kids won't pick up on it." Their linguistic understanding is just too limited. Grown-ups routinely overestimate the usefulness of talking when dealing with kids.

The universal truth in interior decorating also applies to effective communication with children--less is more:

• **Less politeness** ("Darling, would you mind terribly if I asked you to stop hitting your sister, please?")

• **Less explaining** ("When you hit your sister, it makes her sad and hurts her feelings--and her arm.")

• **Less repetition** ("I've told you a thousand times to stop hitting your sister!")

• **And, most definitely, less volume** ("STOP HITTING YOUR SISTER!!!")

Since that rules out the four most common methods of communicating with kids, what's left? Here's how you can talk to them so they'll listen:

Issue commands There's no need to run your home like a military outpost. But keeping your orders simple, direct, and unambiguous is the best way to make sure that your children hear them. "When a situation gets out of control, like every night before bedtime when the kids are bouncing on the couches, I start by asking them nicely to settle down," says Cathy Lappin, a mother of three, ages 8, 7, and 4, in Chicago. "That moves from asking to yelling, and then screaming and crying. And that's just me. You should see how the kids react."

Her mistake is to ask in the first place. A question requires an answer, not an action. If you say, "Are you ready to go to bed?" your very literal child may well think, "No, I'm not (but thanks very much for asking)." Twenty minutes later, he's still watching cartoons, having, in his mind, considered your question and addressed it. Meanwhile, you feel willfully ignored.

A simple observation doesn't rate as a command either. If you were to say, "It's your bedtime," your child might nod in agreement (thinking, "Yes, it is about that time"). But he'd be no closer to turning off the TV.

So what's a good command? It's one that's clear and doesn't suggest ambivalence, say experts. Never qualify or apologize (as in "I'm sorry, but I really think you should go to bed now"). In this scenario, the only appropriate thing to say is "Please turn off the TV and go to bed."

"I don't like to bark orders," says Lisa Fagin Davis of Boston, mother of Zoe, 7, and Marc, 4. "I try to discuss their behavior and the reasons for the command and have them talk through the issue--why they're kicking each other and why it's inappropriate. And then I repeat the ideas to make sure they get it."

How successful is this strategy? "It's okay. It works," says Davis. "We use it every night." The problem is that if the system did work, she wouldn't have to spend an hour every night doing it. The fact is, kids under the age of 6 or 7 just can't understand complex reasoning.

To get through to children, you have to make eye contact and issue a command, say experts. Remove the child from the tempting environment, or remove the temptation itself, to make your point. "You're not ruling a fascist state, but you are in charge," says Dr. Donovan.

But doesn't everyone, even a kid, have a right to his opinion? "Of course," says Dr. Donovan. "But before age seven or so, it's empty opinionating. He can't yet sort out the values you're instilling in him." So, until he can, look him in the eye and state crisp, clear instructions.

Withhold explanations Obviously, while crossing a busy street, you want absolute compliance. Putting immediate safety concerns aside, if you were to have a conversation about some of the possible undesirable outcomes of playing in traffic, your explanation could be scary and disturbing to her. A while ago, after catching my 5-year-old daughter, Maggie, chatting with a lady in the supermarket, I told her not to talk to strangers. When she asked me why not, I explained that some strangers are bad and that it's hard to tell who's bad. Before I knew it, Maggie had gotten out of me that sometimes children are kidnapped, and worse. She was terrified and spent days

obsessing about it. "You should have stopped after 'Don't talk to strangers,'" says Dr. Donovan. "A child doesn't need to know all of the whys behind your request--or even understand them." There is such a thing as too much information.

Providing a slew of reasons also opens the door to distraction and defiance. If you want your daughter to hurry up and finish breakfast and instead you somehow end up in a discussion on the growing body's need for balanced nutrition, ten minutes can go by without her taking another bite.

Plus, kids can take issue with explanations. If your child disagrees with you, the conversation may escalate and become an argument. Avoid the whole thing with these four words: "Because I said so." If that doesn't work, try three more: "Take a time-out."

Be specific "Children are masters of the technicality," says Dr. Donovan. "It's not so much that kids create loopholes to jump through. These are unwittingly provided for them by adults who don't listen to the words coming out of their own mouths."

"If I tell my son, Marc, not to kick people with his shoes, he takes off his sneakers and kicks with his socks," says Davis. "I tell him not to say the word 'stupid,' so he whispers it instead."

Adds Lappin: "I say, 'Don't play in the street,' and they run as fast as they can to the curb and play there. I yell at them to get out of the street, and they say, 'It's not the street, it's the curb.'"

Besides giving nonspecific, loophole-creating instructions, we commit another crime of clarity: using colloquialisms and expressions. This can confuse kids. Everyday ones like "You're driving me crazy" can be threatening to a child. Simpler ones--"eye-popping prices" or "raining cats and dogs"--can also seem dangerous when unexplained. I once told Maggie that "I call the shots in this family," and she burst into tears, thinking that her punishment for bad behavior was a series of painful injections. Needless to say, my point was lost and the next ten minutes were spent comforting her.

Imprecise pronouns can also be diverting, so always refer to yourself as "I." In fact, any pronoun or proper-noun switcheroos dilute meaning. If you're telling your husband the horror story of your recent supermarket trip and say, "Someone emptied an entire box of cereal in aisle six, and Mommy almost blew a fuse," that little someone may think another kid's mom caused a power outage. He won't feel responsible for his actions and might believe you consider him blameless. Let him know the truth. Say, "Junior emptied a cereal box, and I was very angry at him."

Say it once (or twice), coolly "How many times have I told you...?" "What did I just say?" "For the ten millionth time..." When you repeat yourself, you cancel out what you've just said. "Repetition trains the child not to take you seriously," says Dr. Donovan. "It's not that kids have particularly short memories, it's that every time you repeat yourself, they learn they've got leeway." And often they're not listening until you hit warning 1,245. Instead of relying on quantity, go for quality.

Yelling is as natural an impulse as breathing. And it certainly seems easier to raise your voice than to raise your entire body off the couch. But yelling may do more than grab a child's attention--it serves to intimidate, and when you frighten a child, she's not learning.

It's also counterproductive to start screeching, says Dr. Donovan: "Parents who respond with anger are changing the subject. It may have started out as a noncompliance issue, but after you yell, it becomes to the child one of 'You screamed at me--you're a mean mommy.'"

The way to keep on an even keel and avoid repeating yourself is to employ Phelan's trademark strategy: Warn the misbehaving child once (and say, "That's one"), twice ("That's two"), and the third time, give her a time-out. The time-out should last for one minute per year of the child's life (five minutes for a 5-year-old, for example). If the child emerges from her room and commits the same crime, she might, depending on the severity of the infraction, go for a time-out after only one warning. Next time, you can skip the warnings entirely. Increase the duration of the time-out in small increments if needed. Kids as young as 2 and as old as 10 can benefit from this approach.

Since I started doing this, I repeat myself less often and rarely get angry. Plus, the kids now seem better able to remember--and refrain from--the behavior that sent them to their isolation. Consistency--that elusive beast--is built into the system too.

When to give a formal warning is not always clear. "Sometimes the behavior is fuzzy. But you do your best, use your judgment, and make a call," says Phelan. You don't want to start counting for every tiny transgression. And don't forget to praise good behavior, he says. "Over time, you'll find that you resort to counting less and less." And, as we've established, less is best.

When to Use a Time-out

If you try the two-warnings-before-a-time-out system of behavior modification, how do you tell what is countable and what isn't? Besides considering your own temperament, weigh the type of offensive behavior. Guidelines on when to ignore and when to respond:

1. Badgering. Often accompanied by whining. Ignore it.

2. Temper flares. Never attractive in a child (or in a grown-up); start counting.

3. Threats. It depends on the threat. "If a kid says, 'I'm going to stare at you until you give me a cookie,' just ignore it," says child psychologist Thomas Phelan. If she threatens to hit or break something, start counting.

4. Martyrdom. A pouting child should be ignored. This kind of behavior doesn't deserve a response.

5. Buttering up. When a child sidles up and says, "You're the best mommy in the world. And I really, really want a Malibu Barbie," the appropriate response is "Thank you, dear," and ignore the rest.

6. Physical tactics. Any hitting, biting, or breaking should result in an immediate time-out--no warnings with this behavior.

PHOTO (COLOR): Parents are to be seen but not heard? It's easy to unwrite this rule

PHOTO (COLOR): Donating to clarity will benefit you both

~~~~~~~~
~~~~~~~~

By Valerie Frankel

Contributing editor VALERIE FRANKEL's last article for Parenting was "Keeping Kids Cheerful," in the December/January issue. She's a mom of two.

Source: Parenting