

Parenting - listen to your children

Listening to your child boosts their self-esteem and enables them to feel worthy and loved. A parent that acts on the old adage 'a child should be seen, not heard' can make a child feel they are not important. Constantly ignoring your child when they are trying to speak will hurt their feelings and affect the strength of your relationship over time.

It is worth remembering that children can understand language long before they can master speech. You can keep up with your child's evolving language development by paying daily attention to them.

Baby talk

A baby's brain is 'hard-wired' to pay attention to the sound of a human voice. Their mastery of language depends on listening to you speak. Long before your baby can form understandable words, they will respond to you with noises, facial expressions and body language. You can actively listen to your baby and encourage their language development in many ways:

- Accept that crying is the baby's primary method of communication.
- Attend to their needs as soon as you can once they start crying, to let them know they have been acknowledged and understood.
- Spend some time actively listening to your baby's cooing and noise-making by looking them in the eye and encouraging them with smiles and talk.
- Talk to your baby frequently about anything and everything. You can also read to them from books and the daily paper.

Toddler talk

A toddler may have a vocabulary of two hundred or so words and can start stringing words together to make simple sentences. Mastering grammar and sentence construction is difficult and your toddler will make plenty of mistakes.

You can encourage your toddler's language development in many ways:

- It is more important to listen attentively to your child than to correct their grammatical errors.
- Allow your toddler sufficient time to finish what they are trying to say.
- Don't show impatient body language, such as sighing or foot-tapping.
- Answer any questions using simple language.
- Spend some time each day doing nothing else but talking exclusively with your toddler.
- A child that constantly interrupts adult conversations may be feeling starved of sufficient attention.

Older child talk

By the time your child is in their later years of primary school, their language and conceptual abilities are sophisticated. They even alter their speech to suit the circumstances; for instance, they may speak more formally in front of a teacher than they do with family and friends.

You can show that you are actively listening to your older child in many ways:

- Make time every day to listen exclusively to your child without distractions.

- If your child tends to give 'yes' and 'no' answers, try asking open-ended questions such as 'What was the best thing about school today?'
- Allow your child to have differences of opinion and respect their point of view.
- Try not to interrupt, lecture or criticise.

Teenage talk

The teenage years are typically a time of conflict, as the young person starts to assert their independence from parents and authority figures. Communicating effectively with your teenager by listening and paying attention to what they are saying helps to sidestep potential arguments.

Some suggestions on listening to your teenager include:

- Don't expect them to always share your beliefs and values and try to appreciate their point of view.
- They are more likely to listen to you if you listen to them.
- Your attentive listening, empathy and understanding will encourage them to confide in you.
- Don't be put off by their 'grunts' and disrespectful language. Keep the communication lines open at all cost. Model the communication that you want to occur and keep modelling, even when the responses are not what you would prefer.
- Let them know you are always available if they need to talk to you.
- Take an active interest in their life.

Getting help for any family communication problems

There are services available to help families with any type of communication problem. For example, you may need help if:

- You think your baby or child has difficulty hearing
- Your toddler isn't speaking at all by two years of age
- Your child doesn't understand what you say by two years of age
- Your child stutters or has some other form of speech difficulty
- You have problems communicating with your child – except teenagers (you can expect to go through some communication rough patches with your teen).

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your community health centre
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Family counsellor
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321
- Audiologist
- Speech therapist
- Paediatrician

Things to remember

- Listening to your child boosts their self-esteem and helps them to feel worthy and loved.
- Make time every day to listen exclusively to your child with no distractions.
- There are services available to help families with any type of communication problem.

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