

Six Ways You're (Unintentionally) Telling Your Kids NOT to Listen

By Amanda Morgan

Learning to be a good listener is a critical skill. Kids need to learn to be active listeners ([here's how I teach it in the classroom](#)) and [adults need to remember to be good listeners too](#). But there are also things we do as we speak to children that may increase or lessen the likelihood that children will actually be listening.

Here are 6 ways we may be unintentionally telling kids NOT to listen, and how to correct that:

1. Making it Sound Optional

Sometimes we give a direction, but present it as a choice. "Do you want eat your dinner?" "Pick up your shoes, OK?" **In our adult world we know the subtleties that imply that these aren't really optional, but that's all lost on kids.** Make directions...well...direct. That doesn't mean we have to bark or be impolite. In fact, studies have shown that kids respond best to directions that are spoken softly and worded positively (read more about that study [over here](#)). Instead of the ambivalent examples above, try: "You need to join us for dinner now." "Please pick up your shoes. Thank you!"

2. Creating the Wrong Picture

Like I mentioned above, kids respond best when directions are worded positively. I call this "Say What You Need to See" in my [ebook and parenting ecourse](#). If the directions you give are painting a mental picture that is opposite of what you want, or that doesn't clarify what you need, kids are likely to misread your directions.

Here's an example: "Don't bounce in your seat." The visual image created is still of someone bouncing in his seat. I can't tell you how many times I've seen this type of instruction given to a group of children, and not only do the original bouncers not stop, but the whole room suddenly begins to bounce as the silly verbal image of bouncing has crept into the minds of everyone in earshot.

Instead, "Please be sure your bottom is in your chair, your feet are on the floor, and your eyes are on our speaker. We want to be polite listeners for our guest...." The verbal image is of what you DO want to see. **There is less misunderstanding and you're not swimming upstream against the visual of what you DON'T want to see.**

3. Avoiding Eye Contact

Adults are busy. But when we don't take the time to get on a child's level when we're talking, it's less likely the child will take in what we have to say. It's not always that they're choosing to ignore us, it's that they haven't really been invited to listen yet. Stop moving, get low, make contact, and you'll be surprised at how much more attention you get! (Jillian, of A Mom with a Lesson Plan, has [an outstanding post that makes the difference very clear!](#))

4. Saying Too Much

Young children often have trouble processing multiple steps of instructions given all at once. When we find kids aren't following our directions, it may be a sign we need to scale back and give only one or two instructions at a time. Sometimes that means slowing down and pausing after each instruction to allow them time to process. ("Make sure your hands are in your lap *pause*, your body is still *pause* and your eyes are looking at the speaker *pause*.") Sometimes that means having them check back after each task. Sometimes it means drawing out the steps on a picture checklist to help kids work independently, but on just one step at a time. ([Here's an example.](#)) Or perhaps it means politely asking kids to repeat your instructions back to make sure they've heard each part.

5. Forgetting to Connect

We adults are doers. We jump right in and get to work. But when we want kids to listen, they need to first know that we care. Part of connecting is what we covered in point 3. But it also means [validating emotions](#) ("I see that you're feeling...") and using elements like humor and story telling in the way we talk with them to make real connections and draw them in.

Here's one example. When my oldest would get upset that his younger brothers were ruining his Lego structures, my knee-jerk reaction was to simply point out that he'd left them out where they could get them.

Didn't accomplish much.

I'm not sure he even heard anything, other than that his mom was saying it was his own fault.

Then he approached my husband.

My husband acknowledged his frustration, curled up with him, and launched into a story from his own childhood. *"You know your Uncle Roger? He is my little brother. And when I was little I loved to do puzzles. Well, of course, when Roger was little, he liked to take some of the pieces.....So then Grammy said I could do my puzzles in that room with the door shut so that Roger couldn't get to the pieces. Can you think of a place where YOU could work on your projects without YOUR little brothers getting to it?"*

Much more effective. (#dadsforthewin)

6. Failing to Follow Through

Words lack meaning, when we lack action. When we state a boundary ("Throwing balls needs to happen outside, not inside.") but then allow it to be ignored, we will continue to be ignored as well. As we set limits in the future, they'll continue to be challenged. When you say, "We need to brush teeth after story time," make sure that's what happens. When you say, "I won't let you climb on the table," be sure the child is removed each time she climbs up.

I think Janet Lansbury has driven it home for me over and over, that firm limits and follow-through are still an important part of respectful, gentle parenting and child care. This follow-through doesn't have to sound harsh or authoritarian. Janet gives great advice about how to follow through in direct, but also respectful ways on her blog (particularly [here](#)), as well as in her new book, [Elevating Child Care: A Guide to Respectful Parenting](#)*. (*affiliate link)

What do you do to help kids listen?

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