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## Worst Mistakes Parents Make When Talking to Kids

By Emory Luce Baldwin, LCMFT, PEP Certified Parent Educator

All parents have the same familiar complaints about their children's annoying communication habits: they don't listen, they argue, they ignore, they talk back. What most of us do not realize is that children also have complaints about their parents' communication mistakes. As a long-time family therapist and parent educator, I can share with you some of the most common complaints I hear from children about how their parents talk to them. I'll also tell you what I've learned from children about how to better connect with them, get them to listen and encourage their cooperation.

### **"Please stop yelling at me"**



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*I hate it when they yell at me! Yes, I yell at them sometimes. But parents yelling always makes things worse, not better. I like it when they talk to me in a regular voice, especially if they are mad at me, because that helps me feel calmer, and then I'll probably feel more reasonable, too.*

The #1 complaint that children have about parents is their yelling and shouting. Everyone, young and old, hates getting yelled at. As a result, children tend to yell right back when we yell at them. Instead of raising your voice when you feel annoyed or angry, cool the situation by using a normal voice. Demonstrating self-control when you are upset has the added bonus of teaching your children how to control their own emotions, especially in the heat of anger.

### **"Please stop telling me the same things over and over again"**

*Sometimes you tell me the same thing 100 times. The more you tell me something, the more I want to ignore you.*

Parents usually repeat themselves when it seems their children aren't learning and remembering what they have been told. Unfortunately, the more parents say the same things over and over again, the less children pay attention, learn and remember.

Make your reminders more challenging and more interesting by turning them into questions. "Hey, Johnny, can you please remind me again - what's our family rule about talking with our mouths full?" Older children can be engaged in a discussion outside the moment of conflict. "You know, we've always had this particular family policy about polite eating at the table, but I'm curious to know what you think is a reasonable rule for eating with other people." Asking, instead of telling, prompts children to think as well as remember the lesson, thereby reinforcing it.

### **"Please try to see things from my perspective, even when you think I'm wrong"**

*Sometimes I argue with my parents to try to get them to change their minds. It doesn't always work, and that's okay. What really makes me mad is when they won't even listen to my side of the story. I know that I'm not going to change their minds, but I really, really want them to try to understand why something is important to me.*

One reason children argue is that they want their parents to understand their point of view. Parents are often reluctant to hear what their angry children are saying because they don't want to give false hope or prolong the argument. Yet, kindly listening to a child's point of view helps them accept decisions. Often, the most important thing to children is that they feel listened to and taken seriously. Once this is accomplished, it is easier to accept that "No" is the answer.

### **"Please give me more time and encouragement to help me figure things out for myself"**

*I like it when you give me something new to learn and do for myself. But, you forget sometimes that I'm still a kid and can't do it as fast as you. If I'm slow to come up with an idea or if my ideas aren't good, it's probably because I'm trying this for the first time. So, please give me time and don't criticize me too much.*

Children learn more from thinking things through for themselves than by being told what to think; and the more they practice, the better they do - as long as adults practice patience at the same time. The answer to the question, "What do you need to do to get ready for school tomorrow?" may seem obvious to us, but that's because we've been getting ourselves ready in the morning for decades. A 9-year-old will require time and practice to master this mental review.

### **"Please tell me you notice the things I do right, as well as my mistakes"**

*I know I do a lot of stuff wrong, but if that's all you pay attention to or want to talk about, then I start to feel like "I can't do anything right, so why bother?" I feel better and want to do better when you talk about what I'm doing right, as well as what I'm doing wrong.*

Children make lots of mistakes because they are young and inexperienced. It is part of our job to help them notice their mistakes, but they also need our encouragement. When parents appreciate their children's good intentions, efforts and improvements, they feel more motivated to learn more, do more and become more responsible and happy young people.

## Kids' Top Five Tips for Parents

- *Yelling only makes things worse.* Children react angrily, not respectfully, to yelling. Keeping your voice as normal as possible stops a disagreement from getting worse, and often makes the situation better.
- *The more parents repeat, the less kids listen.* Children are more attentive when they are being asked, rather than told, what to do. Taking what you want to say and turning it into a question ("What is the rule about loud voices in restaurants?") invites children to think, remember and restate what you want them to learn.
- *The more parents listen, the more kids feel like cooperating.* Children are okay with parents setting limits, but what they aren't okay with is feeling dismissed, ignored or discounted. Permitting them to "have their say" makes it much easier for children to accept the situation when they "don't get their way."
- *Children need time to figure things out for themselves.* Children want to become more independent, responsible and good at thinking for themselves - and parents want that, too! For adults, this means holding back from giving advice, and then practicing patience as children proceed more slowly than we would.
- *Kids thrive when parents notice what they're doing right - not just their mistakes.* Children feel discouraged when only their mistakes are noticed. Appreciating what children do right encourages them to try harder and do more. Children (like all of us!) do better when they feel better.

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