

Navigator's Nook

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How to get kids to listen By Sarah Joseph

I've been a positive discipline educator for 10+ years and can say unequivocally that children "not listening" is the most common frustration I hear from parents and teachers alike. When I hear these complaints, I normally ask, what exactly are you referring to when you say a child "doesn't listen?"

Often "not listening" is used as a blanket term to describe a variety of challenges including not following directions, not obeying, power struggles, showing big emotions around requests, etc. I always like to dig into what you mean when you say; a "child is not listening" because it makes it easier to find a solution that way.

Why kids don't listen...

(Before we go any further, be sure you've ruled out any potential medical condition that could be affecting the child's hearing or comprehension.)

Children of all ages—toddler through teens—have a hard-wired need for power. When children don't have opportunities to exert their power in positive ways—choosing what clothes to wear, choosing what to eat, picking what game to play, etc.—they will exert their power in negative ways.

Because children DO have power over their bodies, we often see that this is where they are asserting their power in negative ways. These just also happen to be the challenges parents struggle with the most – toileting, eating, sleeping and listening. These types of challenges make us feel powerless as parents because you can't make a child sleep, eat, or listen!

I'm not saying there aren't times when a child is just flat-out ignoring you—that happens! However, more often than not, it's less about "not listening" and more about some underlying issue. Are they tired, hungry, or not feeling well? Or, is there some deeper control issue that is causing them to disconnect such as...chores, home/class work, frustrations, anxiety?

Tips for getting kids to listen:

The tips below are meant to help build connection, improve communication and give kids the sense of power they need. Give them a try and let us know how they work for you.

- Listen to kids – how often do you ignore, not respond, give a ya ya but aren't really paying attention or interrupt the kids in your care? If you really think about it, us adults don't set the best examples of listening for kids. We expect their undivided attention when we speak but rarely give them the same in return. We also usually have unrealistic expectations that they will jump the moment we utter a direction. Again, how often do we jump when they ask us for something? People listen when they feel listened to. Set a good example of what listening looks like. When your child speaks to you, stop what you are doing, look at them, really listen and repeat back something that they have said so that they know you were truly listening. Try "I heard you say... did I get that right?"

- Get their Attention First – Of course, there are times when kids are so engaged in what they are doing or watching that they do ignore us. It is important that we gain our child's attention before uttering a request. Get down to their eye level, maybe touch a shoulder or hand, say their name and wait for acknowledgement that they hear you.
- Use Questions instead of Instructions or Demands – Have you heard of the resistance reflex? It's basically that automatic response of "don't tell me what to do!" in our head when someone is trying to boss us around. We all have it. Just think back to the last time someone tried to tell you how to do something in a not so gentle tone. Yep, there it is! Kids don't get a very good response from adults when they say "you're not the boss of me" or "don't tell me what to do!" so instead they simply pretend they didn't hear us. Try asking questions, that will get them engaged. When we ask questions, the brain tries to find an answer. Pose open-ended questions like: "What do you need to do to be ready for the bus?" instead of "pack your bag!", "what's your plan for getting your work done?" instead of "do your work", "how much more time do you need?" instead of "right now!".
- Take "Don't" out of your vocab – Tell kids what to do instead of what not to do. Ok, I know I just told you to ask questions and not tell them what to do but hear me out. Our brain has a hard time with "don'ts", they are confusing and take a long time to process. Plus, children are inexperienced problem solvers. I like to think about challenging behaviour as the child's solution to a problem they have. When we tell them what NOT to do, they need to figure out a new solution to their problem (i.e.: what to do). But because they are often lacking the knowledge or skills, they will often pick another inappropriate solution. We can save us all time and frustration by simply stating what options are available to them that will solve their problem and be acceptable to us. Start telling your child what they can do instead. "two feet on the floor" instead of "don't stand on the chair", "keep your hands to yourself" instead of "don't hit your bother", "you can do art once you have finished cleaning up your desk" etc.
- Talk about what respectful listening looks like – make agreements about listening with each other and discuss what listening respectfully looks like, sounds like and feels like. Ask questions like: "how does it feel when you are trying to get my attention and I'm on my phone?", "How do you know when someone is listening to you?", "How can we help each other be better listeners?".
- Ensure comprehension – an easy way to ensure your child has heard you and that they understand what you have said is to ask them to repeat back what you have said. By making sure everyone is on the same page, you will see an instant improvement in communication and cooperation.

Remember that "not listening" should be a clue for us that something isn't working for our kids. While it might seem like defiance, misbehaviour or inattention, it is more than likely a way to get our attention or express their need for power. Kids and adults alike have a need to be seen and heard. When this need isn't met, people stop listening, disconnect from us and often act out. By implementing the tips above on a consistent basis, you should see a marked improvement in listening.