

Learning to listen

Listening is a skill that takes time to develop and competency is not easily achieved without guidance and/or support. Those who are most successful at commandeering this skill typically develop an awareness of the social conventions that dictate the rules of a conversation. These rules will be based on the often known but little spoken of expectations that envelop the cultural and social norms of where and with whom we live. For young children, their understanding of listening will be based solely upon what others tell them to do, what they observe others doing, and what others allow them to do. Children learn best when they have consistent guidance and those who are willing to role model and highlight when the boundaries of an expectation are being overstepped. Simply telling them to listen will not be enough to succeed in this area. This article will therefore touch on a few strategies that could be helpful in aiding children to master the art of listening.

Know the expectations

As with any matter relating to teaching children to behave in preferred ways, adults must know the expectations and the limits upon which their expectations are based. For example, if the expectation is for the child to wait until someone else has stopped talking, then this message must be reiterated as many times as needed until the child is successful. Gentle reminders when children butt in may be all it takes to let them know that it is not their turn to talk. As such, any time a child interrupts in a manner that falls outside the expectation (i.e., they talk over someone else), the adult will be tasked with letting the child know that they need to wait until it is appropriate for them to speak. When children learn how to wait for others to finish talking, it follows that they are simultaneously learning how to listen.

When identifying one's expectations, it will be vital to understand the dominant communication style and cultural preference of the household. Monkey see, monkey do is an analogy that is ever-present in the nature/nurture debate, meaning that it will be extremely difficult to teach a behaviour if it is not being role modelled, for example, if the dominant habit of the household is to talk over one another, then it will be probable the children will adopt similar communication methods too.

Developing an awareness of what is occurring in real-time

The way in which children are raised today has changed dramatically since the turn of the twentieth century. As such, children have become ever-present in our conversations and their thoughts and ideas are, in many cultures, encouraged. This shift has meant that children have become excellent talkers, with expanding vocabularies and thoughts to match. The possible problem that arises from this growth is that it can be hard to see the wood from the trees when determining if a child should wait to speak or if the adult/s should stop and listen. One way that this situation could be overcome is to ask one or two internal questions. The first is - *If an adult started talking/talking over me right now, would I think it is okay?* The second is - *What message am I giving if I stop my conversation on the spot to listen to what the child has to say?*

There will be instances where the answer to these questions determine that it is important to stop and listen to the child. Most occasions, however, will point to the likelihood that the child's interruption is not necessary. Multiple examples undoubtedly exist where children's interruptions do not relate to the conversation being had, nor are they intersecting because some vitally important piece of information needs to be shared. As such, if the answers to the above questions lead to the idea that it would be teaching the child that it is okay to interrupt, then it may be worth considering to ask them to wait until there is a break in conversation.

Waiting before speaking

Getting children to wait before they are asked to speak does not have to be done in a fashion that shames or berates them. A quick reminder in soft tones is all that is needed. The more determined child will likely insist that they "just need to say something". Nevertheless, if it can be determined that there is no medical or other emergency that requires your immediate attention, another reminder is all that is required.

One strategy that works a treat is putting your hand out and getting the child to pop their hand on top. This lets them know you know they are there and that they will be asked to talk when you turn to them and invite them to speak.

When children do not want to put their hand down or they walk away, adults can use this, more often than not, as an indication that the child's need to converse was spurred on by the desire rather than the need to talk. Creating an intentional pause in an existing conversation after the child has waited quietly (anywhere from thirty seconds to a few minutes would be fine) with their hand on the adult's hand, is but one way to create a moment to allow children to say what they want without either party teaching the other that it is okay to talk whenever the desire strikes.

When children are asked to wait before they speak, an additional benefit can be gleaned – that being that the child is learning how to develop patience and overcome the instinct to be instantly gratified. When born, babies respond to their every need by crying. When they are hungry, tired, or in want of changing, they are wired to let their carer/s know of their discomfort. With age, children are taught to wait for the things they might want (save immediate or life-threatening needs). In acquiring the skill to wait, children are forming necessary and important neural pathways that help them to forego the need to have and say what they want when they want. In turn, this skill is said to benefit individuals by way of improved mental health and relationships.

Firm but fair

As it is with teaching children any skill, adults fare best when they are firm in their resolve. If a child has been asked to wait, children must wait. If a child resists the urge to wait and the adult's determination wavers, children discover that rules are not cemented and that if they persist, they will get what they want when they want it. Every occasion a child does the opposite of what they are supposed to, they learn that persistence pays off, even if it makes it hard for them and everyone else in the interim. Knowing that there are ways to get around an adult's rules becomes transferable knowledge, meaning that children will apply this same persistence to get other things that they have been told they cannot have. In the long-term, children's persistence often transforms into tantrums, tears, threats, physical acts of violence, guilt trips, nagging, and/or martyrdom. One of the only ways to avoid these behaviours is to remain firm in what is said. Or in other words, say what you mean and mean what you say, with the caveat of not saying it meanly.

Reading body language

Body language is one of the ways in which human beings communicate. While research suggests some varied results (ranging from 70-93%), it is indisputable that body language plays an important role in communicating effectively. Young children are very apt at reading body language, but, like us all, can forget to read other's body language and/or the situation at hand when the impulse to talk takes over. To help children better read a situation, ask them to stop and to look at either your or another person's body language. Ask them to interpret what is being said by someone else's facial expression. For example, "Is my face saying to wait or is it saying to talk straight away?" When children are reminded that there are more ways than one to listen, they will be better at being able to account for their own and other's interaction needs.

When siblings want to talk at the same time

Sibling rivalry is often one of the hardest things adults have to deal with when raising children. More often than not, siblings will have the desire to talk over each other, which frequently leads to unintended and unwanted arguments. Trying to get children to wait for one child to finish talking before the other interrupts is difficult and hard to mediate. Although there are no set or fast rules that are assured to fix such problems consistently, there are strategies that can help reduce the frequency of this problem reoccurring. One such strategy involves the how many miles/kilometers rule when driving in the car, which means that one child gets to talk (uninterrupted) until the milometer reads a certain amount. Another rule might be that on certain days, child A gets to speak first and then on the opposite days, child B gets to speak first. Directing children to read other's body language (particularly the adult's, as the child may care less about their sibling in the spur of the moment) can help to reiterate to children that their desire to talk first is important but not imperative. Other strategies may include asking a range of questions and asking each child to answer in ten words or less. Naturally, who comes first and who goes second can be developed in any way so long as it is consistent and predictable. Like anything, a child may not like the rules, but if they are able to anticipate them, they will be more accepting of them when they are applied.

When children interrupt their siblings (or even adults), reiterating the idea of respect can create opportunities to learn and re-learn the lesson at hand. During any interruption, asking the child if their choice to interrupt was respectful or

disrespectful can help them to better understand and accept responsibility for the rules around conversational turn-taking. Another suggestion relies on the adult requesting children to think of other ways they could become a respectful conversationalist. For example, “When you interrupted your sister, I saw her face drop. This tells me that she is disappointed by your interruption. What could you do instead of speaking over the top of her?”

As always, remarks of respect or disrespect should be delivered with a kind and respectful tone. In any circumstance and with any chosen strategy, the goal is not to shame a child but rather to point out whether or not their actions are conducive to everyone’s needs, including their own. In any case, constant reminders of expectations will help to drive home the social behaviours most valued by the adult, which after a lot of repetition, will become part of a child’s chosen repertoire.

Knowing they will get it wrong

Children learn best by repeating actions over and over again. This statement means that without an adult’s willingness to repeat themselves and the rule or the expectation, children will learn very slowly or potentially not at all. Given that conversations are something that occurs frequently in most households, there will be endless opportunities to engage children in the art of listening. When they get things wrong, restate the rule and guide them towards an alternative action, even if they resist. Most importantly, however, is for the adult to remain aware of what behaviour they are trying to teach and ensure that their actions are not negating their intentions, for example, telling children to wait before talking and then allowing them to talk anyway.

How does listening fit in?

If children are continuously exposed to situations that guide them to wait to talk, it means that they will be better at paying attention to what others are saying around them. If a child is given an instruction and they do not follow said instruction, the same strategies can be applied. An example might be, “When you chose not to listen to me, I felt upset. What is it my body is telling you to do?” Having the child answer a question will help to establish that they are aware of the instruction. A follow-up question, such as, “What did I ask you to do?” may be needed. Even if it is, think of it as a learning opportunity. Once the child has answered, consistency comes in, which in other words means that the adult ensures that the child completes the instruction. To conclude such an experience, the adult could offer an acknowledgement/some intrinsic praise, which might go like, “Thank you for listening to me. Can you read my body/face now? What is it saying? Is it happy with the decision you have made?”

Summing it up

Listening is a skill that takes practice. Expectations are what drives adults to teach children any skill or behaviour. To achieve the best results, adults should identify what their expectation is and then ensure, through consistent reminding and use of strategies, children follow, to the best of their ability, the rules that teach said behaviour. Simply telling them to listen or do something will not be enough. Instead, adults must rally their efforts to make sure children understand that rules are not flexible. Instead, they are there to help everyone learn how to speak and listen in ways that are respectful of themselves and others. When adults consistently put into practice strategies that teach any behaviour they will enjoy the fruits of their efforts more frequently.

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