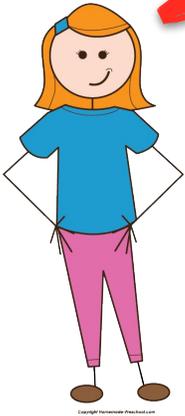
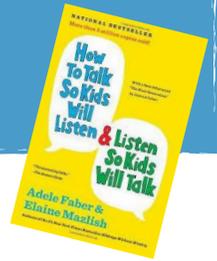


# HOW TO TALK SO YOUR KIDS WILL LISTEN

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One of my favourite parenting books isn't really about parenting, it's about communication. Good communication skills make all the difference in our relationships. While a fairly straight-forward skill, many undermine its value and ignore very basic tips for being an effective listener and commanding an attentive audience. Below are some tips from ***How to Talk so Your Kids will Listen, and Listen so Your Kids Will Talk*** by Adele Farber and Elaine Mazlish.



## Helping Children Deal with Big Emotions

- 1. Listen with full attention.** It can be discouraging to try to get through to someone who isn't really listening. It's much easier to tell your troubles to a parent who is really listening. He doesn't even have to say anything. Often a sympathetic silence is all a child needs. In fact, the less you say the better!
- 2. Instead of questions and advice, acknowledge with few words** – "Oh," "I see." It's hard for a child to think clearly or constructively when some-one is questioning, blaming, or advising her. There's a lot of help to be had from a simple "Oh ... umm ..." or "I see." Words like these, coupled with a caring attitude, are invitations to a child to explore her own thoughts and feelings, and possibly come up with her own solutions.
- 3. Name it to tame it.** The child who hears the words for what she is experiencing is deeply comforted. Someone has acknowledged her inner experience. ("That sounds frustrating!").
- 4. Instead of explanation and logic, give a child his wishes in fantasy.** When children want something they can't have, adults usually respond with logical explanations of why they can't have it. Often the harder we explain, the harder they protest. Sometimes just having some-one understand how much you want something makes reality easier to bear. ("I wish I could make it easier for you to practice math").
- 5. Practice compassion.** If our attitude is not one of compassion, then whatever we say will be experienced by the child as phony or manipulative. It is when our words are infused with our real feelings of empathy that they speak directly to a child's heart. You'll sense after a while what is helpful to your child and what isn't. With practice you'll soon discover what irritates and what comforts; what creates distance and what invites intimacy; what wounds and what heals. There is no substitute for your own sensitivity.

# Engaging Cooperation

One of the frustrations of parenthood is the daily struggle to get children to behave in ways that are acceptable to us and to society. Part of the problem lies in the conflict of needs. The adult need is for some aspect of cleanliness, order, courtesy, and routine. The children couldn't care less. A lot of parental passion goes into helping children adjust to society's norms. And somehow the more intense we become, the more actively they resist. Some of the methods most commonly used by adult to get children to cooperate are:

- ▶ **Blaming and Accusing** – “Your wet towel is on the floor again! Why do you always do that?”
- ▶ **Name-calling** – “You have to be a slob to keep such a filthy room. You live like an animal.”
- ▶ **Threats** – “If you don't turn off that TV I am going to throw it out the window.”
- ▶ **Commands** – “I want you to clean up your room right this minute.”
- ▶ **Lecturing and Moralizing** – “Do you think that was a nice thing to do, to grab my phone from me? I can see you don't realize how important good manners are. What you have to understand is that if we expect people to be polite to us, then we must be polite to them in return.”
- ▶ **Warnings** – “Careful, you'll hit your head!”
- ▶ **Martyrdom Statement** – “What until you have children of your own. Then you'll know what frustration is.”
- ▶ **Comparisons** – “Peyton has such beautiful table manners. You'd never catch her eating with her fingers.”
- ▶ **Sarcasm** – “Is this your best writing? I didn't know you knew Chinese.”
- ▶ **Prophecy** – “Just keep dressing like that. You'll see, no one is ever going to respect you. You will never get a job.”

Here are five skills to try that many parents find helpful. Not every one of them will work with every child. Not every skill will suit your personality. And there isn't any one of them that is effective all the time. What these five skills do, however, is create a climate of respect in which the spirit of cooperation can begin to grow.

- ▶ **Describe.** Describe what you see, or describe the problem. It's hard to do what needs to be done when people are telling you what's wrong with you. It's easier to concentrate on the problem when someone just describes it to you. (“There is Lego on the floor in the playroom.”)
- ▶ **Give information.** Information is a lot easier to take than accusation. When children are given information, they can usually figure out for themselves what needs to be done. Refrain from giving the child information she already knows. (“I stepped on your Lego and hurt my foot”)
- ▶ **Say it with a word.** Children dislike hearing lectures, sermons, and long explanations. For them, the shorter the reminder, the better. Don't use your child's name as your one-word statement. (“The Lego!”).
- ▶ **Talk about your feelings.** Make no comment about the child's character or personality. By describing what we feel, we can be genuine without being hurtful. (“I don't like stepping on Lego!”).

# Alternatives To Consequences

To punish or not to punish? What could I do instead?

- 1. Express your feelings strongly – without attacking character** (“I’m frustrated that you baked brownies and did not clean the kitchen”)
- 2. State your expectations.** (“I expect you to clean up if you use the kitchen.”)
- 3. Show the child how to make amends.** (“The kitchen needs to be cleaned before I start dinner.”)
- 4. Give the child a choice.** (“You can clean the kitchen or you will not be allowed to bake anymore.”)
- 5. Take action.** (Enforce rule if one needs to be created.)
- 6. Problem-solve.** (“What can we work out so that you can bake when you want, and so that I’ll be sure the kitchen will be clean afterwards?”)

## Encouraging Independence

- 1. Let children make choices.** Don’t tell children what to do if you can help it. Offer limited choices when possible. (“Are you in the mood for your grey pants today, or your red pants?”)
- 2. Don’t ask too many questions.** Too many questions can be experienced as an invasion of one’s private life. Children will talk about what they want to talk about when they want to talk about it. (“Glad so see you. Welcome home.”)
- 3. Don’t rush to answer questions.** When children ask us questions, they deserve the chance to explore the answer for themselves first. (“That’s an interesting question. What do you think?”)
- 4. Don’t take away hope.** By trying to protect children from disappointment, we protect them from hoping, striving, dreaming, and sometimes from achieving their dreams. (“So you’re thinking of trying out for the play! That should be an experience.”)

The fact is, this whole business of encouraging autonomy can be quite complicated. As much as we understand the importance of children being independent, there are forces that work against it.

- ▶ First, there’s the matter of sheer convenience. Most of us today are busy and in a hurry. We usually wake the children ourselves, button their buttons, tell them what to eat and what to wear, because it seems so much easier and faster to do it for them.
- ▶ Then we have to cope with our strong feelings of connectedness to our children. We have to fight against seeing their failures as our failures.
- ▶ It also takes great restraint and self-discipline on our part not to move in with advice, particularly when we’re sure we have the answer.
- ▶ But there’s something even larger that interferes with our rational desire to help our children separate from us. Sometimes there is satisfaction that comes from being so totally needed by small human beings.

Parents travel a bittersweet road. You start with total commitment to a small, helpless human being. Over the years you worry, plan, comfort, and try to understand. You give your love, your labor, your knowledge and your experience—so that one day your child will have the inner strength and confidence to leave you.

## Praise

A child's self-esteem is important, so what can parents do to enhance it? Providing praise is a great way to help validate your child's experiences and let them know what you are proud of. But praise can be tricky business. Sometimes the most well-meant praise brings about unexpected reactions. For some kids, praise can seem unauthentic and fake. It can also cause kids to feel under pressure. Some children even view praise as manipulation.

Instead of evaluating, describe.

**Describe what you see.** ("I see a clean floor, a smooth bed, and books neatly lined up on the shelf.")

**Describe what you feel.** ("It's a pleasure to walk into this room!")

**Sum up the child's praiseworthy behaviour with a word.** ("You sorted out your pencils, crayons and pens, and put them in separate boxes. That's what I call *organization!*")

Most of us are quick to criticize and slow to praise. We have a responsibility as parents to reverse this order. Start now and try to offer 5 times as much praise as criticism to your kids!

## Reversing Roles

What parents think of their child can often be communicated in seconds. When you multiply those seconds by the hours of daily contact between parents and children, you begin to realize how powerfully young people can be influenced by the way their parents view them. Not only are their feelings about themselves affected, but so is their behaviour.

When a child persistently behaves in any one way over a period of time, it requires great restraint on our part not to reinforce the negative behaviour by shouting, "There you go again!" or "I knew you'd never change." It takes an act of will to put aside the time to deliberately plan a campaign that will free a child from the role he's been playing.

To free children from playing roles:

**1. Look for opportunities to show the child a new aspect of himself or herself.** ("I didn't know you knew how to use tools, you put that toy together really quickly!")

**2. Tell others about your child's strengths (a lot).** ("He held his arm steady even though the shot hurt.")

**3. Model the behaviour you'd like to see.** ("It's hard to lose, but I'll try to be a sport about it. Congratulations!")

**4. Be a storehouse for your child's special moments.** ("I remember the time you...")

**5. When your child acts according to the old label, state your feelings and/or your expectations.** ("I don't like that. Despite your strong feelings, I expect sportsmanship from you.")

**From the book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. (2004).**