

## “I’m Talking But They’re Not Listening!” Communicating with Children

By Sue Dinwiddie

**Are your words falling on deaf ears? Does your child often ignore your requests?** Fine tuning the way you interact with your child may help this situation. Consider what your body is saying to your child. Body language is often more important than words. Are you close or shouting from across the room? Do you attempt eye contact and have a friendly facial expression? If the situation is serious, does your face say so? How about a gentle, encouraging hand on your child’s shoulder? Body language can encourage as well as discourage actions and attitudes.

### **How well are you listening to your child?**

Children who feel listened to are more likely to be cooperative in listening to their parents. There are three helpful methods of listening to your child: active listening, reflective listening, and listening with your eyes.

**Active listening** is being truly tuned into what your child is saying to you. When your child tells you something that is important to him/her, stop what you are doing and focus on your child. You may encourage speech with simple words, “uhuh,” “yes,” “oh.” Avoid saying much or you will be talking, instead of listening. When you understand how your child *feels* and *wants*, restate the *feeling* and *desire*. “Oh, so you are saying that it is frustrating to stop your project immediately. You want a few more minutes to finish before you start your chores.” If you are incorrect, your child will let you know and you may request more information. “Oh, tell me more so I can fully understand.”

**The goal in active listening** is to try to understand how it is from your child’s view point. You do not have to agree or even give in, but you do need to understand. Instead of solving the child’s problem, look together for a solution which will work for both of you. “We need to find a way for you to have more time on your project and still pick up your room. What choices can you think of?” Let your child give the first choice, then you can give one, until you come up with something agreeable.

If your child cannot think of choices, you can do that part. Offer three choices and let your child choose. “We could set the timer for 15 more minutes before your start cleaning your room, you could keep that project up for the next few days and pick up the rest of the room, or I could straighten your room instead of taking you to the movie this afternoon.” If your child doesn’t like any of the choices, then you choose one. “Okay, I’ll use the time I was going spend taking you to the movie to straighten up your room.” If your child objects, you can ask which choice is preferred, or you can say, “Well, next time you may want to be part of the problem-solving.”

The point of active listening is to refrain from solving the problem yourself. Although this method does not always work, children who are listened to and take part in finding solutions are generally more positive and cooperative.

**Reflective listening** is helpful when your child lashes out at you in anger. “I hate you!” Resist your temptation to yell back, “Don’t you ever talk to me again that way! I want some respect around here.” Try reflecting back the child’s feeling. “It sounds like you are really angry.” (or *disappointed, frustrated, embarrassed, etc.*). Reflecting back the unpleasant feeling helps validate it for your child and gives you both a platform for discussion. Negative feelings often block the path to cooperation and need to be understood and defused before one can get on with it.

### **Here are some examples:**

#### **Child**

“I won’t! You can’t make me!”  
“I can’t do it.”  
“That’s not fair!”

#### **Nonreflecting Adult**

“Don’t get sassy with me!”  
“Of course you can. You need to try harder.”  
“Life is not fair.” Or “Of course, it is fair.”

#### **Reflecting Adult**

“You sound angry! (or tired)”  
“This seems hard for you.”  
“You feel like your brother gets more attention (or privileges) than you do.”

Following up reflective listening with a soft phrase often yields a lot of cooperation. Try “I wonder why . . .” or “Tell me more about . . .” to encourage more discussion.. “I wonder what part of the job is making it hard for you.” Remember that children who are in the heat of anger or disappointment may need a period of time to calm down. If your child sulks off, let her/him know that you will be available to listen when he/she is ready. (That may be a few minutes or several days.)

**Listening with your eyes** is helpful when there is a chronic behavior problem with your child. Now is the time to really observe your child. Answering the following questions may help you to understand what causes this misbehavior.

- What are your child’s favorite activities?
- What are your child’s strengths? (What does the child do well?) This may be anything from playing soccer to cuddling with you.
- When does this misbehavior occur? Look for patterns:
  - ✓ Time of day
  - ✓ Who is nearby
  - ✓ What did you say
  - ✓ Anything else you notice
- What does your child actually want? e.g.,

- attention, the toy, a best friend, etc.
- What might get your child's attention in a positive way?
- How could your child get what he/she wants in an acceptable way?

If your child is unresponsive when you speak, try some of the following techniques for clean, simple messages.

Avoid saying "no" and "don't." These are totally negative words. Try being as respectful to your child as you are with adults. Replace saying what not to do "Don't leave your jacket on the floor" with what you want the child to do, "Please hang your jacket on the hook."

Only ask a question if you are willing to accept any answer. Think about the following questions? "Do you want to take a bath?" "Do you want to do your homework?" "Are you ready for bed?" If you can't accept any answer, don't ask a question. State a polite request. "It is time for bed now."

Replace nagging with a simple sentence of what you see. "I see toys scattered all over the room."

Give your child simple reasons: "Brushing teeth prevents cavities."

Offer choices: (1) Two acceptable choices: "Do you want to pick up blocks or puzzles?" (2) When-then choices: "When you put your shoes on, then you may go outside." (3) Either-or choices: "Either play more quietly or play outside." Either-or choices are giving a consequence of actions. The consequence should have something to do with the action and be as immediate as possible. Usually a punishment is overdoing it.

Give preparation time before you expect action. "In five minutes, it will be time to go." Children change gears slowly and are reluctant to rapid transitions.

Keep your reminders short: If child forgot to wash hands, say, "Hands."

Describe your feelings with I-statements. There are three levels of I-statements.

**Simple I-statement:**

I feel \_\_\_\_\_, when \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_.  
                   feeling                  behavior                  reason  
 "I feel anxious when you throw the ball inside because I'm afraid something will break."  
 You may either begin with "I feel" or "When"

**Directive I-statement:**

When \_\_\_\_\_, I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_; I want \_\_\_\_\_.  
                   behavior                  feeling                  reason  
 changed behavior  
 "When the television is so loud, I cannot concentrate; I want you to turn it down."

**Problem-solving I-statement:**

I feel \_\_\_\_\_, when \_\_\_\_\_, because \_\_\_\_\_.  
                   feeling                  behavior                  reason  
 How else could you . . . ?  
 Show me another way to . . . ?  
 What are other choices?  
 "When you yell at me when I talk to my friend, I feel irritated. What are some choices for you while you are waiting?"

Keeping a sense of humor and fun helps in communicating with kids. Laugh with, though not at, your child. Use fantasy or make a game: "Let's clean-up today as though we are robots." Or "I'll set the timer and let's see if we can beat our record in cleaning up this room." Write a note or draw a picture. If your child slams the door frequently, put a humorous picture of a crying door with cracks on the door. If your child forgets to flush the toilet, put up a picture by the toilet as a reminder. Effective communication habits can enhance your relationship with your child and bring you closer together.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

**Books**

Dinkmeyer and McKay. *The Parent's Handbook, STEP: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting*. American Guidance Service, 1982.  
 Dinwiddie. *I Want It! Problem-Solving Techniques with Children Two to Eight*. Better World Press, 1997. 650-325-3033.  
*Let Me Think! Activities to Develop Problem-Solving Abilities in Young Children*. Better World Press, 1997. 650-325-3033.  
 Mazlish and Faber. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. Avon Books, 1980.  
 Shure. *Raising A Thinking Child* (also a workbook). Pocketbooks, 1996.

**Videos (Check your local library)**

Coloroso. *Winning at Parenting . . . Without Beating Your Kids*. Audio & Video Tapes. Littleton, CO: Kids Are Worth It!, 198. 800-729-1588.  
 Mazlish and Faber. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. KET, The Kentucky Network, 2230 Richmond Rd. #213, Lexington, KTY 40502 800-354-9067.

**Books for Children**

Crary. *Feelings for Little Children*, (color board books): *When You're Mad, Happy, Silly, Shy*. Parenting Press. 800-992-6657.  
 Dealing with Feelings Series: *I'm Furious, Scared, Excited, Mad, Frustrated, Proud*. Parenting Press. 800-992-6657.  
 Preston. *The Temper Tantrum Book*. Scholastic. 1969.

*Sue Dinwiddie, a former Head Teacher at Bing Nursery School at Stanford University, is a parent educator, staff trainer, and writer. Sue's books include I Want It My Way! Problem-Solving Conflicts in Programs for Young Children and Let Me Think! Activities to Develop Problem-Solving Abilities in Young Children. Parenting Press. Her programs and articles develop as parents and staff request help with various issues of raising healthy, confident, competent children*

