

## Speaking so kids will listen

### 25 simple ways to get your message across to kids

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## Introduction

Communication technology has advanced in leaps and bounds over the last few years. As I write this book I am 12,000 kms from my family but I have many methods at my disposal to reach them – mobile phone, landline, text messaging, MSN and emails. I use each of these as the need arises.

We haven't made the same advances in personal communication as we have in technological methods. We maybe able to beam a message to a loved one half way around the world but sometimes the hardest thing is to connect with a family member in the next room. We may speak but will anyone listen?

I have long been fascinated with the nuances of communication. As a teacher I became aware that the way I strung words together would influence how my message would be received. As a parent we can quell or incite our children's anger depending on our choice of words.

I have put together this little guide together of 25 ways that you can use to help you get your message across to children of all ages.

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## A. Simple statements to getting cooperation from kids

Ever made any of these communication blunders when trying to get some cooperation from your kids? I call them blunders because they tend to have the affect of making kids' ears close over.

- a) **Overtalking:** "Jeremy, I have told you a million times can you just turn that TV down!"
- b) **Martyr statements:** "I do this because I love you. I ask you to help and you ignore me!"
- c) **Comparison:** "Why don't you keep your bedroom neat and tidy like your sister?"
- d) **The Prophecy:** "You're lazy just like your father/mother..... . You will come to no good."
- e) **The lecture:** "Now listen to me!...." Better to record your best lectures and burn them on to CD and tell your children the tracks they should listen to at the appropriate time!"

The following are simple, non-judgemental statements that place the responsibility on to children to cooperate with you. Keep the statements short and to the point. When we go lengthy with our words we tend to get personal.

### 1. Describe what you see or the problem.

This type of statement really is an invitation for a child to do something:

e.g.

'The living room looks really messy.'

Some kids will respond favourably but many won't. So try.....

### 2. Give children information.

The bare minimum information is sometimes sufficient for some kids to respond:

e.g.

'The living room needs to be cleaned before we have dinner.'

Okay, they are still not responding then try.....

### **3. State your expectations or the rule**

Using the power of the group, ie the family, works for some strong-willed kids:

'We clean one lot of toys away before getting another lot out.'

The power of 'we' doesn't always work but with some children the following is an appeal to reason.

### **4. Give an I-message.**

I-Messages state what you want and how you feel about a situation without laying any blame. They are great for defensive kids.

'I don't like it when your toys are on the floor all day as I feel like everything is a mess.'

When all else fails try the following....

### **5. Write a note**

A written note works wonders with some children who are sometimes forgetful or parent-deaf:

"Dear Jeremy, Please clean me up before dinner. I will feel much better if I can see some daylight. Regards, The carpet." **PS.** It helps sometimes to clean up one mess before starting another.

**Now Practise these little language ideas:** Your child has thrown a wet towel on your bed. Write a statement that could invite your child's cooperation using these skills:

a) Describe what you see or the problem:

b) Give information:

c) State your expectations or the rule:

d) Describe what you feel:

e) Write a note:

## B. Getting cooperation from strong-willed or argumentative kids

Some children are harder to gain cooperation from than others, particularly strong-willed children. These children value power and can drive parents to distraction. Following are some useful language skills to try with these power-freaks, by the way, you know you have a strong-willed child if you constantly feel angry about their behaviour.

### 6. Tell them what you will do

**This is my favourite.** Most of the time parents tell their children what they should do. "Pick up your toys." "Get out of bed." "Come to the table." "Be home on time." The list goes on. Rather than tell children what they should do tell them what you will do.

e.g.

"I will listen to you when you have calmed down."

"I'll serve ice cream when you are at the table."

"I only drive when children are quiet."

"I will wash the clothes that are in the washing basket."

### 7. Choices

Some children just like to make a decision themselves. Tell them what to do and you take control away. Give them a choice between two ways of acting and they will choose one because they are in control.

e.g.

"You can stay inside if you are quiet. If you want to be noisy you can go outside."

## 8. The broken record

Some children are bush lawyers and try to defeat you with their arguments. Don't get involved in an argument of a child's making, particularly if it is about a routine or established rule.

Basically, state your instruction and then keep repeating your instruction despite your child's attempts to engage you in an argument.

e.g.

Parent: "It's time to clean your teeth."

Child: "But I don't want to."

Parent: "It's time to clean your teeth."

Child: "My teeth aren't dirty."

Parent: "It's time to clean your teeth."

## 9. When.....then

Sick of always saying no to your child. Then trying using a **when.....then** statement such as:

**"When** you have done the chores **then** you can turn the TV on."

This statement puts the onus on your child to cooperate. It is not a bribe. Rather it is placing the pleasant after the less pleasant. In effect, you are saying you can have the good things once the bad things are done. This is also known as **Grandma's technique** as she was an expert at putting the good things after the bad things – 'you can have your ice cream once you have eaten your peas!'

## 10. Inviting cooperation

There is a group of children who for one reason or another hate to be told what to do. They like to have their own way. They respond less to being told and more to being asked. So when you want to enlist their cooperation ask, don't tell! It also helps to smile!!!

e.g.

"Can you help me out by cleaning the table away after dinner?"

**Now practise your new language skills:** In each situation choose a type of response from above:

**a) A child continually keeps a messy bedroom:**

Response:

Skill:

**b) Your child refuses to do his agreed chores:**

Response:

Skill:

**c) A young person won't budge when you want to use the computer:**

Response:

Skill:

## C. Say it in writing

There are times when the written word is the most effective form of communication in your family. At Christmas and birthdays we write messages of good wishes and affection on cards. During the years we stick notes on fridge doors or noticeboards to tell others about important dates. Or we scribble important reminder messages for children on pieces of paper and leave them on the backs of bedroom doors so children don't miss them.

Reminder notes are just one form of written communication. The written word is a vastly underutilised form of communication in families. Here are few great ideas either tried by the author or provided by parents that may prompt you to use the written word when appropriate.

### **11. Letter of support**

If you really do have something important to say to your child write a note and leave it for them to read. If your child has experienced disappointment and rejects your attempts to support him then put your thoughts down on paper so that he can read them when he is ready. While the spoken word can easily be rejected messages that written are written have the advantage of being absorbed when the reader is ready

### **12. Tell them off in writing....then throw the first draft away**

If you are angry with your child write him a note then consider throwing it away! Writing helps you feel better by getting the feelings out. Sometimes kids need to know we are angry or upset with them but often a parents' anger is caused by other issues and can be taken out on children. Writing gives us perspective!

### **13. Write how you feel**

A mother told me in a parenting seminar how her husband had difficulty explaining his emotions around the death of a loved one. He withdrew from his family for a time and his children were confused. He then wrote a note to his school-aged daughter discussing his feelings of loss but in a way that was accessible to his daughter. This mother told me that this letter helped her daughter understand her dad and why he was acting differently.

#### **14. Create a special message book**

Here is a good idea for dads who work late or who have night meetings that take you away from kids. Give each of your children a special message book and get in the habit of writing messages in it. They can be affectionate messages, a good joke you have heard or some news-anything that will be of interest to your child. If you come home after children are in bed write something in their message book and leave it by their beds so that is the first thing they see when they wake up in the morning.

#### **15. Random Notes of Affection**

Many mothers know about this but the Random Notes of Affection (RN'sA) in the school lunchbox is still a popular form of written communication. RN'sA can be a terrific surprise for kids, particularly when it accompanies a food treat!

**Now practise:** Choose one of these five ideas and put it into practice over the next week.

**Which idea?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Child:** \_\_\_\_\_

## D. Esteem and confidence builders

Building self-esteem and confidence in children and young people can be a huge challenge for parents and teachers. Praise some children too much and your words become meaningless. Praise children when praise is not deserved and children will reject your words when it has been really earned.

It is helpful to use language that promotes optimism, explains their achievements and doesn't link children's self-esteem to the results of their endeavours.

### 16. Tell me what you think!

When all the praise comes from parents, children and young people can easily dismiss it. Encourage them to explain their own achievements in their own language. This helps them own it and make it more real. "Tell me about your piece of art. What do you think about it?" can be a response to a child who always looks to parents for approval. As Virginia Satir once said, "High self-worth means being able to respond to people without being defined by them."

### 17. Attribute good results to personal ability

Optimists and pessimists explain the good things that happen to them differently. When a pessimist does well he will typically explain his good results to luck, circumstances or other external forces. "I did well in that maths test because I got the right questions. What a fluke!"

An optimist will attribute his or her good results to ability or endeavour. "Yeah, I did well in that maths test because I studied hard. Besides I am pretty good at maths." The optimist's remark attributes success to ability and endeavour and thus applies to other settings. Optimists can be a little blind to their shortcomings at times, but it is better in the long to work from a base of optimism. Teach children the skills of optimism, particularly encourage them to give due credit to their own ability and acknowledge when they have done something well.

## **18. Focus your language on children's effort, improvement, contribution and enjoyment**

One useful technique for low risk-takers and low-achievers is to focus your comments on their effort, improvement and enjoyment of an activity. It can be difficult at times to find some positives in children's endeavours so focus on the process rather than the results.

**Effort:** "You are trying so hard with your writing Jenna."

**Improvement:** "Your reading has improved so much in the last few weeks. Well done."

**Contribution:** "I really appreciate you sweeping the floor and cleaning away the dinner table. What a great help!"

**Enjoyment:** "Its great to see you just love playing soccer."

## **19. You can do it!**

Every child needs someone in their lives who says and believes that they can achieve. Nearly every parent has experienced the thrill of watching a baby learning to walk. In fact, parents usually pull their child up with their sheer will. If you can bring that same level of encouragement to other interactions with children then they will have a great ally to help them be successful.

## **20. Make a fuss over a hidden skill or talent**

One of the keys to high self-esteem is to have a skill or talent that is a little different from others. This is helpful particularly to children or young people who struggle a little in high status academic or even social areas. It is particularly powerful if it fits with a child's or young person's interest and they can be encouraged to set goals to improve that skill even further.

**Putting it in to practice:** Read this scenario and answer the questions

Josh was building a model plane. He could make the wings stick. He asked his father for help. "You're using the wrong glue. You should be using the cement on the shelf. You have cut the wheels out really poorly. It's all-lopsided. Let's take the wheels off and make a new start." Josh said to his dad, "Don't worry. I'll do it myself. I don't need you help!" Dad just shrugged his shoulders and couldn't work out why his son was so difficult.

**a) What mistakes in terms of discouragement did his dad make?**

i)

ii)

**b) What could this father have said or done?**

i)

ii)

iii)

## **E. Talking about sex, drugs, violence and other real life issues:**

Sometimes it seems talking to children and young people can be absolutely nerve-wracking. Never more nerve-wracking than talking about real life issues such as sex, alcohol or other real-life issues. Say the wrong thing or, even, say the right thing in the wrong way and they can clam up.

The following are five ideas to help you talk with young people (they may be useful for children too!) about some of life's thornier issues.

### **21. Talk in the third person**

It is better to talk in the third person when discussing risk-taking behaviours and other real-life issues with young people than talking about their own lives. Ask them about their own sex lives, alcohol habits and the like and many kids become evasive and simply close up. Couch your conversations in third party language and they will be far more responsive. Often issues crop up from time to time that provide opportunities for you to talk with kids about touchy areas.

### **22. Mess with their mind**

Teenagers spend most of their time around other teenagers. A by-product of teenagers living in each other's pockets is that they tend to reflect each other's views, which are narrow and lack some historical perspective. As a result many of them believe that it was they who invented adolescence and they have a monopoly on all knowledge pertaining to drugs, alcohol, sexuality, parties, relationships, gender politics, careers and the world, in general. Parents and teachers need to give their view to young people if for no other reason but to give another perspective. It needs to be done with tact and guile. A great example of messing with teenager's minds was when a father overhearing three sixteen year olds watching and discussing a fairly blatant sex scene on Big Brother Uncut approached the boys saying:

*"Do you guys approve of sex in public, do you?"*

*"What?"*

*"You guys see having sex in a bath in front of a million people as normal?"*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"It's just that you are watching a show that normalises sex in public, which is changing the way that we all think about sex."*

*"Get out of it. Things are different now. It's only a TV show. It's set up for the cameras."*

*“Yes, it is set up, but have you noticed who initiated the activity?”*

*“Yeah, the girl did. So what?”*

*“Well, things have changed hugely in the last ten years. It is now girls who do much of the initiating in sexual activity. It is you guys now who are the hunted rather the hunters. Girls are now far more predatory than in my day.”*

With that comment he walked out of the room, followed by three boys who wanted to know exactly what he meant. He had piqued their interest by messing with their minds a little and challenging their comfortable views.

### **23. Give them the facts, don't scare them**

Kids don't respond to scare tactics but they do respond to facts. Facts, not fear, works with savvy young people. If you want to get a message across about sexuality, alcohol or drug usage then make sure you know what you are talking about. Vague comments about 'drinking alcohol at a young age is bad for you' falls on deaf ears. It is better to be armed with facts about safe and dangerous drinking, safe and unsafe sex and adolescent health if you want to engage them. You also need to listen to them, accept their opinions and challenge any misinformation they have

To get information and 'the facts' to help you talk to young people about sex, alcohol and drugs go to: [www.betterhealthchannel.com.au](http://www.betterhealthchannel.com.au)

### **24. Talk to teenagers at night**

Teenagers sleep patterns are pushed way back. Many are wide awake at night but sleepy in the morning. Often they are waking up just as we are winding down at night. Take the opportunity to engage them at night when they are often ready to talk. Many parents have discovered the hours between 10.00pm and midnight are prime times to engage in some banter with their teenagers.

## 25. Use TV, current affairs and music as entry points

How do you start a conversation with a young person about some of these difficult to talk about issues? Television, current news issues and the lyrics in music can provide entry points for adults to talk with young people about traditionally touchy issues. Sometimes a timely question can spark a terrific conversation. Don't be afraid to seek out their opinion and engage in two-way conversations about a whole range of issues that many are wrestling with. It is important also that they know where their parents stand, and that their views and opinions are respected by parents. A segment on a television show that deals with homosexuality can prompt a conversation about the topic. "Are there any gay kids at school?" "How are they treated?"

### Putting it into practice: Think about the following questions

- a) How did your parents handle those real-life 'thorny' issues with you and your siblings?
  
- b) What processes do you currently have that help you communicate openly with your children?

## Conclusion:

Communication with kids is an art form that has many intricacies. It is the nuances that make all the difference. The more we learn and the more we practise the better we become at communicating with children and young people.

To be a better parent we need to be better communicators.

## Find out more

Many of the communication techniques were taken from two of my books- [One Step Ahead](#) and [Great Ideas for Tired Parents](#). They provide communication solutions to common situations such as sibling fighting, power struggles and getting children to help. They are available at our secure bookshop [www.parentingideas.com.au/books1](http://www.parentingideas.com.au/books1)

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