



Dear ,

I have no doubts that just by signing up for this newsletter, you are **a loving parent**, or at least have **a child in your life who's growth you care about** very deeply.

Sometimes, it can be hard to communicate to a growing child just how much you care, and that what you do is solely with the best intentions for **their personal growth**.

I'd like to use this week's newsletter to show you some of the best ways to get your child to **truly listen and connect**, while ensuring that they **feel loved** along the way.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Myers, PhD

## 20 Ways to Talk So Your Kids Will Listen

The WAY we talk to our kids has a significant impact on their learning and ability to listen to us. We are continually modeling to our kids how to act and behave, and the way we talk to them fits right into this category. The way we speak to them and others is showing them how we want them to respond to us. I have found that there are generally three different ways that parents communicate with their kids. The first one is an aggressive communication style. These parents yell a lot, put their kids down and use attacking words. Their children respond in many different ways, mainly by acting out more, feeling fearful, yelling back and ignoring their parents' orders.

The second form of communication commonly seen is a passive form. These parents who mutter soft, cautious words and tones to their kids often find that their children walk all over them. Unfortunately, these parents are so passive that sometimes when they are pushed to their limits, they suddenly change their tone into an aggressive one. The third way that parents can communicate with their kids is with assertiveness; this is by far the most effective way to interact with kids at all levels. Assertive communication is firm, consistent, clear, positive, warm and confident. Assertively communicating with children is a real skill, yet it shows your kids that mom and dad know what they're talking about and to listen.

Here are my 20 top tips for improving the WAY we talk to our kids:

1. **Use your child's name.** Your own name is music to your ears. Our kids are no different, and it helps to get their attention before delivering your message. Eg., "George, please go and get..." Young children can often only concentrate on one thing at a time. Call your child's name until you have their attention before you



speak. E.g., “Helen.” (Wait until she stops kicking the ball and looks at you.) “Lunch will be ready in ten minutes.”

2. **Use positive language.** Try not to say “no” or “don’t” all of the time. If we say, “Don’t drop that glass,” or “No running inside,” or “Don’t drag your coat in the dirt,” your child has that thought and image embedded in their mind and more often than not, they will drop the glass! Instead, try to say what you want them to do. E.g., “Only walking inside please,” or “Hold onto that glass, it’s a special one,” or “Hold the coat up, so it doesn’t drag.” This style of communicating requires much thought and practice but is well worth the effort. Try to eliminate words you use that may be ridiculing (“You’re acting like a big baby.”), name-calling (“You’re a naughty boy.”), and shaming (“I was so ashamed of you today.”). This type of language achieves very little except leaving your child feeling worthless. Kids will often cut off communication with those who use these words and begin to develop a poor self-concept. Positive and kind words give your child more confidence, resulting in more happiness and positive behavior, while also encouraging them to try hard and achieve success. Kids learn to imitate you and deliver the same respect and praise to others. Examples of positive words are: “I like the way you remembered to pack up your toys,” “Thank you for helping me clean up this mess,” and, “You tried so hard to share your things with your sister, it made me feel very happy.”
3. **Connect with your child using eye contact.** You may need to get down to their level or sit at the table with them. When you are chatting with your kids, this also shows them what they should do. Not only does it demonstrate good manners, but it also helps you to listen to each other. Say your child’s name until you get their eye contact, especially before giving them a direction. It is important that they give you their attention, and you should model the same behavior for them.
4. **Use volume appropriately.** When in the classroom teaching, I used to have a class next door to me whose teacher always yelled. The kids used to put in their earplugs and eventually stopped listening at all. The teacher was continually trying to shout over the noise of the kids, what a nightmare! The same applies at home; don’t ever compete with a yelling child. Talk only when they have calmed down. If you use the volume of your voice appropriately for the majority of the time, raising your voice in an urgent situation should not be ignored. They will sit up and take notice because it doesn’t happen all of the time. Shouting orders or directions from another room may also fall on deaf ears after a while. For example, yelling “Turn off the TV now please, Chad!” or “Hurry up and get dressed!” from the kitchen gives the impression that you’re busy and not very serious. Walking into the room, joining in for a minute or two and waiting for the commercial break will go down with far more cooperation. You are modeling respectful behavior from the beginning, and you have come to them with your direction, so they know you mean it!

5. **Suggest options and alternatives.** When you want your kids to cooperate with you, it is far easier if they can understand why they need them to do something and how it is to their advantage to do so. They need to see the importance of following your directions. For example: – “When you get dressed, you may go outside with Daddy.” – “Which jumper would you like to put on, the red one or the blue one?” – “When you finish your homework, you can then watch tv.” – “Which book would you like to read, this one or that one?” – “When you get dressed for school, you may then play with your toys.” Adopting words like “when” and “which” makes the child feel as though they have choices, even though there is no room for negotiation. Using these words works far better than using “if” words. Also, try to include your child in helping you solve a problem. For example, instead of saying “Don’t leave your toy trucks out there,” try saying “George, think about where you should store your toy trucks, so they’re in a safe place, and come and tell me when you’ve decided on a good spot.” Try to offer alternatives rather than saying a flat out “no” or “don’t.” For example, “You can’t get the paints out just now, but you can draw with the crayons instead.”
6. **Keep it simple.** Young kids have trouble following too many directions given at once. We can probably relate to that when we ask someone for travel directions and are then bombarded with instructions we later forget. Try to stagger your requests into small blocks. E.g., if you say, “Helen, go and pack up your toys, but first put your dirty shoes outside and then feed the cat.” Chances are, Helen will feed the cat then go outside to play because feeding the cat is the last thing she remembers you asking. Even though we want to improve our communication with our kids, be receptive to their level of interest in the conversation. If you are getting a blank stare, call it quits. If you feel as though you’re waffling on, try to use a more direct approach next time you visit the subject.
7. **Keep away from nagging.** At the end of each school day, I wanted the children in my class to tidy the room before going home. I felt that they should learn to tidy up after themselves and take pride in their classroom. I knew that if I went around asking each child to pick up their rubbish, wipe their desks, empty the rubbish bins, and clean the sink, nothing would get done. So I created a job chart. Each job had a child’s name next to it, and I showed it to them at the start of each week. I would rotate the positions weekly to avoid monotony. I explained that five minutes before home time each day would be “job time.” Just before the bell, I would walk around the room and pick which job or jobs were completed to perfection. That child or children would receive a bonus or prize. My room was immaculate each day, and I hardly had to say a thing! This can work well at home too. Either writing things down or having a chart with incentives in place will eliminate lots of nagging. It is essential to recognize and praise your child’s effort, as well as reward desired behavior. Try to set a time where kids know what is expected; they thrive on routines. For example,

set a time to do their chores in the afternoons. When they are playing, they don't like to be interrupted, just as much as we don't when reading a good book. If your children know what is expected of them and when chores should be completed, you shouldn't have to nag to get things done.

8. **Model and expect good manners.** Good manners at home or anywhere shouldn't be optional. If you model good manners to your children and everyone else, they will see that having good manners is expected and displayed on a consistent basis. Start teaching your children to say the basics such as "please" and "thank you" before they can talk. Children deserve the common courtesy of manners that adults use with each other. They will often imitate the speech and behavior of their parents and caregivers. Say "please," "thank you" and "you're welcome" to your kids as you would anyone else.
9. **Be gentle but firm.** If you have made your decision about something, stick to it. Make sure you and your partner agree on the issue and stay united in your decision. Your kids may not like the choice at the time, but they will know it stands firm and won't bother persisting with either of you or playing one parent against the other. Make your requests sound significant, speaking as though you mean it. Requests made in a wishy-washy tone gives kids the impression you are not that concerned whether they will follow your directions or not.
10. **Ask open-ended questions.** If you want to get your kids to open their minds and think more, you need to ask them open-ended questions. That is, questions that are not answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer. This questioning style provides invitations to say more and to share their ideas and feelings. For example, instead of asking "Did you enjoy Peter's party today?" you could ask "What was the best part of Peter's party today?" Respond to their ideas to show them you are interested in what they have to say and that they are important to you: "Really?" "I understand." "What about..." "That is interesting!"
11. **Check for understanding.** If you find that your child is not responding to your requests or getting confused by your instructions, remember to check for their understanding before moving on to the next topic. Ask them to repeat what you have said. If they can't, you know that it is either too long or complicated for them to understand. Try to rephrase your choice of words with shorter and more straightforward sentences.
12. **Explain what you want with "I" messages.** When asking your child to do something, you will receive a greater response by explaining what you want regarding thoughts and feelings by using "I messages." This is far more effective than using orders or "you messages." It lets your child know how their behavior makes you feel. Kids sometimes don't consider how their behavior will affect others. By using this strategy, it may help to give more consideration to their actions, and it gives them more responsibility to change their behavior. For example, "I would like

you to come over here, please,” instead of “Come over here,” or “I would like you to give Oliver a turn please,” instead of “Give Oliver a turn!” It is a softer approach and children who wish to please others will respond to this type of language. Explaining how you feel also helps kids to see why they should comply. For example, “When you run away from mommy in the store, I feel worried because you could get lost.” Use “when you...I feel...because...” words.

13. **Give notice.** If your child is fully engrossed in an activity and it is time to leave, give them notice, so they get used to the idea. For example “George, it is nearly time to go. Start saying goodbye to the puppy please.”
14. **Use inquiry-based listening.** Show your kids that they have your full attention and you care enough to listen to them. Reading the paper, vacuuming and working on the computer is too distracting to give your kids your full attention. If you really cannot talk at that point, don’t pretend to be listening. Promise them a time when you can hear them and be sure to follow through. Show that you are interested in what they have to say by using inquiry-based listening: when you respond to them with words that encourage more conversation. For example “Sounds like you’re saying...” or “How did that make you feel?” or “Do you mean...?”
15. **Make time for one-on-one conversations.** This is especially important if there is quite an age gap between your children. Sometimes older siblings talk over the younger ones, and sometimes the younger ones prefer to let the older siblings do all the talking. Conversations with older siblings can sometimes be above the younger kid’s level of understanding. Moreover, older siblings require stimulating discussions where they can learn and inquire for more information. Therefore, try to get some one-on-one time with your kids at different times so you can talk at their level and use appropriate vocabulary. It might be while walking to the park, reading a book together before bed, or driving to get ice cream. It doesn’t have to be structured time, but take advantage of opportunities for quality time as they arise.
16. **Don’t sweat the small stuff.** By all means, enforce your rules, but try not to sweat the small stuff. Kids will tune out from listening to their parents if they tend to lecture over little things often. For example, frequently telling your child what they “ought” to be doing all the time will eventually fall on deaf ears. They are not thinking for themselves what they ought to be doing because they are usually told. For example, instead of saying, “You must listen to your teacher, or you won’t understand,” try to use an approach where they can think for themselves about what they should do. Use inquiry-based questions such as, “What do you find hard to understand at school? Why do you think you find this difficult? What could you do in class to learn more from your teacher?” With this approach, you can have a more connected discussion where the child has to think of a resolution and strategy for improving their behavior or solving their problem. When you do need to enforce a more serious rule that is non-negotiable, your kids are more likely to listen.



17. **Be considerate.** Think about the way that you talk to your friends. Then think about the way you speak to your kids. Is it with the same consideration and tone? More positive relationships between parents and kids would develop if adults gave as much thought and consideration talking to their kids as they do when talking to their friends.
18. **Show acceptance.** When you show your kids that you accept and love them just the way they are despite their differences, they will be more likely to share their feelings and problems with you. They will know that as they grow and change, you will be there for them no matter what. As parents, we do not have to accept inappropriate behavior such as violence or teasing. We can, however, accept and love our kids as they are by their character, personality and individual interests. For example, Oliver says “Mom, I’m feeling scared to go to bed.” A response to encourage more communication would be, “That’s okay, Oliver. I’ll leave the door open and turn on your night light. I’ll pop in later to check on you.” A poor response would be, “Don’t be a big crybaby, Oliver. You’re old enough to know better than that. Only baby boys get scared!”
19. **Don’t interrupt.** Try not to interrupt or scold your kids when they are telling you a story. Kids will lose interest in sharing their feelings with you if you shift away from their story and use the time to teach them a lesson. For example, Henry came home really excited from Sally’s place and started to tell his mother all about the great time he had playing down by the dam. His mother rudely interrupted his story and began to lecture him on the dangers of playing around water. Henry didn’t finish his story and thought twice about sharing his experiences with his mother the next time. Henry’s mother indeed should remind him of the rule about playing near water and ensuring there is an adult present, but at another time or at least when he has finished his story.
20. **Make conversation a priority with your kids.** Open and comfortable communication with your children develops confidence, self-esteem, good relationships with others, cooperation, and closeness with you. Take the time and effort to foster your relationship and communication skills by talking with your kids as much as you can. Remember that talking with kids is a two-way street. Talk with them and listen to what they have to say; listening is just as important as talking.