



HOW TO GET KIDS TO LISTEN

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When was the last time you heard a child referred to as obedient? It's probably been a while. That's too bad, because the best research tells us that obedient children are happy children. And, from my experience as a family psychologist, the parents of obedient children are happy parents.

Since all parents want their children to be happy, the question becomes: How does one get a child to obey? Is there some trick to it?

Well, there are certainly are a lot of parents who think so. They believe that proper discipline is a matter of using the right methods, techniques, and strategies – what I call “consequence delivery systems.” Parents have been using these behavior modification-based methods since they became popular in the 1960s – seemingly to no avail. Would anyone argue that today's kids are more obedient than kids were several generations ago? I don't think so. The reason these methods and techniques don't work is that proper discipline is not a matter of proper methods. It's a matter of a proper attitude on the part of the parent.

Let me illustrate the point. Let's say that for a week I observe the classroom of a grade school teacher who has the reputation of being the best disciplinarian in her district. She consistently has fewer behavior problems than any of her colleagues. What is she doing? She's making her expectations perfectly clear. Which means, first, she communicates in simple, declarative sentences. She doesn't use fifty words when she could use ten. The more words you use to communicate your expectations, the less confident you sound.

Second, she prefaces her instructions to her students with authoritative phrases like, “I want you to...” and “It's time for you to...” She says, “It's time for you to take out your math books and turn to page 25,” as opposed to, “Let's take out our math books and turn to page 25, okay?”

Third, this teacher does not explain the motives behind her instructions to her students. Why? Because she knows that explanations invite arguments.

Whenever parents tell me they're dealing with an argumentative child I know that these well-intentioned people are explaining themselves. They tell their child why they want him to pick up his toys, for example. And he argues, because you can always pick apart an explanation. If you don't explain yourself when you give an instruction to a child, then the child, being a child, is almost surely going to ask for one. He's going to ask, “why?” or “why not?” At which point – get ready for a big surprise – your answer should be: “Because I said so.”

These very useful four words – and no, they will not cause psychological damage to your kids; quite the contrary – are a simple, but powerful, affirmation of the legitimacy of your authority. Say it calmly. Don't scream it. Nothing good is ever accomplished by a person who screams.

Last, but certainly not least, when giving instructions to a child, do not – let me repeat: do not – bend down to the child's level. Getting a child to do what he or she is told is a matter of looking and acting and talking like you have complete confidence in your authority. Bending down to a child's level does not look authoritative. It looks, in fact, like you're one movement away from being down on your knees in front of a king.

I know – you've read somewhere that you should get down to a child's level when you talk to him. Well, all I can tell you is that there's a lot of really bad parenting advice out there. And that's but one example. Speak to children from an upright position. That causes them to look up to you. And that is a good thing – for them and for you both.

I'm John Rosemond, author and family psychologist, for Prager University.