

*How do I Get My
Kids to Listen*

“My child won’t listen, I’ve tried everything!”

I hear this the most in my 20+ years of working with children. It is a submission of sorts, as if their child is simply wired differently and can’t listen.

Yes, children have different temperaments, and some will listen with less effort than others. That doesn’t mean they’re incapable of listening. We have to teach children to listen. Use the following guide to help you reach parenting bliss.

Framing

Framing is a technique that I have used as a parent, teacher and speech therapist. The idea is you want to present your expectations to your child before the event. They are more likely to attend and listen beforehand because our kids are more regulated and cooperative during this time.

When my son was three-years-old, he hated transitions, especially if he was having fun. An epic tantrum would ensue if we left the park before his playmates did. To remedy this, before we got to the park, I talked to him about what to expect. This is how I framed it.

We're about to go to the park, but we can only stay for a short time. Your friends may still be there when it's time to leave. You will be very upset, but when I say it's time to go, I need you to say bye to your friends, hold my hand and get ready to leave. If you listen, we will come back to the park tomorrow.

Or, you could say:

If you walk over when it's time to go without screaming and crying, there will be something special waiting for you.

You may need to do this initially until your child can work through the transition. Once he's successful, you can reduce the positive reinforcement — *the special treat* — because he will become accustomed to leaving when you say it's time.

Once you've **framed** the event and your expectations, use this script and have your child fill in the blank

Ok, let's go over what we just talked about.
We're going to the _____ (park).
We're going to play with _____ (my friends).
When it's time to go, even though I know you'll be sad; you need to
_____ (listen).
If you listen you'll get _____ (a surprise).

Children will always do better when things are predictable, structured and consistent. By framing the event ahead of time, you give them a road map for success. If you try to intervene as the tantrum happens, it's much more challenging to remedy. They're emotionally dysregulated and incapable of taking in whatever it is you're saying.

Give one warning.....only one

This one is hard, but it's critical to do. Most parents will fall into the trap of warning endlessly. Once you've warned your child for the 10th time, you're so frustrated that you give a disproportionate consequence to the actual behavior. Essentially, the punishment does not fit the crime.

It's essential to avoid this. It teaches your child that you don't mean what you say. Or that they don't have to tune in until the 7th or 8th warning. If you have a child who tests boundaries, they will test you whenever you set up this framework. And, it causes you to get overly upset and frustrated, leading to an overreaction.

Follow through

Let's assume you walked through the framing process, your child filled in the script's blanks beautifully, and you are feeling large and in charge. It's time to leave the park, and the whole plan falls apart. Your child is unable to hold up their end of the deal.

This can happen, so what do you do? If you've laid out a clear plan, highlighted the expectations, and explained the consequences, you have to stick to the plan.

For example, if you promised a treat in the car, if they did not transition nicely, then the treat is no longer an option. Yes, this will lead to a tantrum. You simply hold space, validate how they're feeling, but don't say too much and allow the tantrum to happen.

You must maintain your boundary here. When tantrums occur, we tend to ask our kids several questions or give multiple explanations justifying our decisions:

Well, if you had listened I would have given you the treat, but now I can't. Let's talk about this. Why didn't you listen to mommy? It hurts my feelings when you don't listen. I'm very sad that you didn't listen to me. When we don't listen it's not nice..... (you get the picture)

Resist this urge to talk. When a child is in the throes of a tantrum, they are emotionally dysregulated. This dysregulation is developmentally appropriate. When we speak to a child during this time, we make the tantrum worse because we tax his sensory system and give him more to process. It's not cold to remain quiet. You can create a warm, calm and loving space during this time. Here is my script:

I know I get upset when I can't have the things I want. I know next time you'll be able to listen.

Then stop. You validate how your child is feeling. Your tone is kind and empathetic, and that's all you need to do at that moment.

Warning: It gets worse before it gets better

*“Albiona, I tried doing what you said, and she fought back so hard!
Her tantrums have been epic.”*

We should expect this. People, but children especially, do what’s called mapping. They take stock of all the experiences they’ve had and consider the outcome after they’ve engaged in a behavior. If the tantrum led to a negotiation yielding the child to get something valuable until that point, they would continue to have tantrums. They may not get the initial thing they wanted (i.e., more time at the park), but you may give them a second item or activity to help calm them down (playing a favorite game or with a highly preferred toy). This second offering can backfire.

Your intentions and efforts are valid, but it reinforces the tantrum. A child will take stock of this, and their brain maps it out, saying that it leads to something desirable when I respond this way.

Allow the consequence and tantrum to unfold without additional concessions. As they develop, they need to understand boundaries and limits.

Consistency is everything

Once you hold a boundary in place consistently, things will improve. Just like anything, when we stay consistent, the outcome is always better, and with time it gets easier. The first few times are always the hardest. If you stay the course, you and your child will gain so much more in the end.

The Outcome

When you practice this consistently, your life and child's life will drastically improve. You will go from feeling like you want to scream because of sheer exhaustion to parenting with calm and ease. You will be shocked because you will say something once and gain compliance. Your child will know you say what you mean, and they will trust you. Your child will be more regulated and calm. They will learn that negotiating isn't always on the table and tune in to what you're saying. Additionally, kids walk away, beginning to understand the needs of another, that the world does not always bend in their direction. They will have the foundational tools to deal with this in life.

Your children will be more joyful and connected with you. And you will begin to find some sense of balance. Children prefer things to be predictable. While we can't always predict our day, they should know that we are impeccable with our word. We mean what we say.

There are days when life will happen, and things will inevitably get in the way. It's ok, give yourself grace. There is not a right or wrong way to parent. Go back to this guide as many times as you need because I promise, one day this will be in your rearview mirror, and you will wonder, "Where did the time go?"

Parenting is a journey. Breathe and take it one day at a time.