

Affirming Your Child's Voice

By Chick Moorman and Thomas Haller

“Stop interrupting me when I’m talking.”
“You have to learn to speak up for yourself.”
“You ask too many questions.”
“Tell me with words. I don’t understand whining.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?”

These phrases and others like them are sending mixed messages to our children. They are telling them: “Talk, but don’t talk.” “I want to hear your opinion, but not all the time.” “Use words, but only when it’s convenient for me to hear.” It’s no wonder many of our children are confused about when and how to access their own voice.

The old adage “Children should be seen and not heard” is **not** one that many parents today espouse. But while it’s true that we all want our children to speak up and use their words, we don’t want them interrupting, monopolizing our time with an endless stream of questions, or incessantly challenging our role as parents.

On one hand, it seems okay for a child to ask for what he wants if what he wants is another helping of potatoes. On the other hand, it doesn’t always feel appropriate for that child to ask for another toy while shopping at the store. We want our children to be creative thinkers and share their ideas. Yet, we don’t always applaud when they publicly state opinions about school rules or challenge a teacher’s grading system.

Children don’t automatically know when and how to speak up. They don’t understand the appropriate times to interrupt. The most effective way for children to learn when and how to speak up is for you to teach them. If you want a behavior, you have to teach a behavior. If you want children to learn to use their voice in appropriate ways at appropriate times, you have to help them. And it is important you do so by using your own voice in respectful, nurturing ways.

Below are suggestions for when to encourage your child to speak up and words he might use when he does. Use the suggestions to help your child create her own voice so she can become an empowered, confident, self-responsible youngster.

Children need to speak up when . . .

1. They don't understand something.

Children can become frustrated as they try to comprehend the mysteries of the world around them. It's hard to understand why things work the way they do. The more clarification children can get from adults, the better they're able to grasp the abstract nature of their world. As parents, we need to be available and open for questions of any nature. If we are closed off or apprehensive for any reason, children will sense our mood and eventually stop asking.

Teach them to say, "I don't understand this," "Can you help me figure this out?" and "Will you explain this to me?"

2. They need help.

Children need help stacking blocks, reaching toys on a high shelf, writing a thank-you letter, understanding a math concept, handling a peer relationship, and in many other situations as they move through each developmental stage. Some situations they can handle themselves. Others they cannot. A key component to becoming independent is knowing when and how to ask for help.

3. They want something.

Wanting something and needing something are two different things. Yes, it's okay for children to ask for what they need. It's also okay for them to ask for what they want.

Just because a child learns to speak up and ask for what she wants doesn't mean she will get it. Sometimes what a child wants is unhealthy or unsafe. It is our job as parents to deny those requests while respecting the child's right to vocalize her desire to get what she wants.

For some children, whining becomes the preferred way of asking for what they want. Our role is to give them useful words to say what they want instead of whining. By helping them learn to say, "I want to stay up longer," "I want to be held," or "I want to get down," you teach them that using words is their best hope for getting what they want in your family. They also come to understand that whining doesn't work with you.

Children need to learn that sometimes getting what you want is a matter of timing. If you want a cookie, that's great. And you might not get it until after dinner. It is permitted to want and even ask for a toy in the toy store. And the toy may not be forthcoming until you create a plan and implement that plan in an effort to obtain it. Say, "I hear your strong desire for the toy. What are you willing to do to help get it? What is your plan for paying for it?"

4. They prefer NOT to have something.

Did you ever go on vacation with a teenager who didn't want to be there, one who pouted for the entire week you spent in a cabin in the woods? If you have, you know the value of teaching children to voice their opposition to something you want for them. "I don't really like hooded sweatshirts" is important information to have before you make a sixty-dollar purchase that your child will never wear. "Lima beans is my least favorite vegetable" is valuable data to accumulate before you head to the grocery store.

5. Their personal space has been violated.

Children need to be taught to find and access their voice whenever they experience inappropriate touch. Being touched in the private areas is always inappropriate. A discussion of appropriate and inappropriate touch needs to be held early and often in a child's life. Role-play both kinds of touch. Teach your children to speak up clearly if inappropriate touch occurs. Teach young children to say, "That's not appropriate," or "Nobody gets to touch me there." Teach them to use their voice to tell you if anyone touches them in an inappropriate way. Practice that conversation. Teach them the words to use. "Dad, Billy touched me," or "I got a wrong touch."

Help your teen learn to say, "It's my body and I want you to respect it," and "The answer is no and I don't need a reason."

6. They have an idea.

Children are great thinkers, especially if we encourage their thinking. They see the world from a different point of view than we do. Their ideas are just as important to them as our ideas are to us. Allowing children the opportunity to share their ideas and encouraging them to do so empowers them, stimulates their imaginations, and builds ownership for the results their ideas produce.

7. They have a solution to a problem.

Encourage your child to speak up and offer possible solutions when problems arise. Involve him or her in solution-seeking meetings. Invite him to join in the brainstorming of possible solutions. Include her input as you attempt to reach consensus on a workable solution. There is always more than one way to solve a problem. Your child's solution may be the one that works best for her. By taking her suggestions seriously, you encourage her thinking, help her see herself as a problem solver, and increase the chance that she will offer solutions in the future.

8. They are asked a direct question.

Recently, we asked a four-year-old how she was doing. The mother spoke for the child and replied, "She's feeling kind of shy today." The child never looked up. There was no need to: The mother was her voice.

When you speak for your child, you teach her there is no need to activate her own voice. The message you send her is, "Your voice is not important. There is no need to use it. I'll take care of your thinking and responding." When you speak for your child, you encourage her to do less speaking for herself in the future.

9. Someone is in danger.

We wish someone had spoken up before the massacre at Columbine High School a few years ago. We wish someone had used his voice before the most recent teen suicide. Whenever there is potential danger, we want and need children to speak up. And we want them to do it quickly.

"I don't want to hear any tattling" a parent recently told her son as he began to tell a story about his older sister. But what if the older sister was stuck in a tree and was hanging from her broken ankle? What if the sibling was playing with matches? What if a schoolmate was urging her to sniff cleaning fluid?

Teach your child the difference between getting someone IN trouble and getting them OUT of trouble. If your son wants to tell you about how his sister took his ball to get her in trouble, teach him to use his voice to communicate his feelings and what he wants to his sister. Teach him to say, “I don’t like it when you take my ball. I want you to give it back.” Be there with him when he speaks to his sister to make sure his words are heard.

If your son witnesses a dangerous situation, teach him to communicate it quickly and directly. Give him some starter words that will tip you off that he is communicating potential danger. ”Mom, I see danger,” “Shannon needs help,” or “Trouble alert” work well as clues that danger is lurking.

Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman are the authors of *Teaching the Attraction Principle to Children: Practical Strategies for Parents and Teachers to Help Children Manifest a Better World*. They are two of the world’s foremost authorities on raising responsible, caring, confident children. They publish a free monthly e-zine for parents. To sign up for it or obtain more information about how they can help you or your group meet your parenting needs, visit their website today: www.personalpowerpress.com.