

WHEN TO FOCUS AND WHEN TO LISTEN

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We spent time with a lovely family recently. There was Mom and Dad and two little girls aged 3 years and 5 years. It was a busy, happy family and it was fun watching the dynamics between parents and children. It was particularly gratifying to see the amount of positive reinforcement given to the children. This was balanced with clear expectations of behavior and immediate consequences like 'time-out' when necessary.

There was one thing in particular that we did notice. When Laura, the older child, was concentrating on something there was no way you could get her attention. You would have to call her name at least three times, and progressively louder each time, before she indicated that she heard you. Laura's mother told us that she and her whole family (her parents and her brothers) are all the same way. She described it as 'being focused'. This kind of focus, in her mind was a positive thing. I can recall times when I have been so engrossed in a book that I have found it difficult to drag myself away from it, but having seen this family in action I really don't think 'being focused' is the right description. I suggest that they have got into the habit of not listening.

Having visited this family a number of times we have observed that whenever Laura is being asked to do something or is being corrected, the parents have not insisted that she look straight at them when they speak to her. Instead, her head is down or turned in the opposite direction and she continues with the activity she is working on.

Of course there are times when we need to concentrate and should not be disturbed. Children are in a huge learning curve and learn more quickly when their attention is undivided. However, those are not the times I mean. I am talking about the issue of not listening. We need to teach our kids to answer when they are spoken to. I believe we make a choice to listen or not to listen. For example, when I pick up a book I am choosing whether or not to cut off the outside world by getting involved in the story. We may not think that this is what we are doing, but we develop auto responses.

Failing to listen is disrespectful. It makes people feel they are not worth listening to. Children need to learn to listen to instructions from the time they are small because all their lives listening is a required skill. Being unaware can also be a safety issue. Many people have been killed because they were not concentrating on what was going on around them. For example, someone deep in thought as they walk across the parking lot may be unaware of being followed by a predator. Listening to loud music in a car or wearing earphones has caused people to be killed by trains.

So how do you fix the problem? First of all look at your own listening habits. Are you aware of what is going on around you? How many times does

someone have to speak to you before you answer him? Are your kids constantly saying, "Mom, Mom, MOM!" a dozen times before you take any notice? Your kids follow your lead. Next, explain to your children what you expect when you speak to them. If you are giving them instruction or correcting them, then tell them they must look straight at you. Don't speak to them until they are looking at you. Say you will tell them only once and that you expect them to do as you ask immediately. Do not raise your voice to get their attention. Tell them what the consequence will be if they do not respond to you the first time. Stick to your word. By acting this way your kids will not only be showing respect, but they will be safer through being aware of their environment. It is imperative for children to learn when to focus and when to listen.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.