

Help! My child doesn't listen very well.

Even though I remind him repeatedly, he's not cleaning his room or putting away his possessions.

First and foremost, it is important to understand what is going on with many seven and eight-year-old children in regard to listening. Young children do not have mature inner speech. In other words, they do not talk to themselves inside their heads like adults. This has profound implication for disciplining children.

Mature inner speech is the manner in which we, as adults, think through the consequences of our actions before we act. Most young children, knowing the consequence (loss of TV privileges, etc) still choose to misbehave. When the consequence is given, they meltdown with upset and begging, "I'll be good now." At around six to eight years of age, inner speech is maturing. This means that what used to be only outer speech now is going underground to become inner speech. For the first time, children have two conversations to attend to at once. They are more like adults. They can listen to the chatter in their heads as well as the talk of others. Often they will ask, "What?" even as you talk, appearing deaf at times. To help them through this developmental process here are some suggestions:

1) Stay calm. Remember, "What you focus on you get more of." When you are upset, you are always focused on what you don't want.

2) Do not shout at your child from across the room. Usually, we will start shouting the child's name. "Kenyon, Kenyon, do you hear me. KENYON! Listen to me," etc. This upset will be followed by a lecture. "I am your mother and I expect you to listen to me. Do you hear me now?" Instead, walk up to your child and get as close to his face as you can until he makes eye contact with you. Once your child makes eye contact, gently say, "Well there you are." Then say, "Room." One word will be a sufficient reminder for many children.

Follow this up with encouragement as he begins to do what you've asked of him. You might say, "There you go. You can do it. Sometimes it is just hard to get started."

3) If your child is not following through with a task, there is a good chance you are not following through with encouragement. You are telling children what you want them to do, but not taking the time to celebrate their accomplishments. Children need lots of encouragement. Imagine a football game where everyone sat quietly until a touchdown was made. We need to encourage our children like we do a team attempting to get two yards for a first down!