

Practical Tips to Help Parents Stop Yelling

by Justin Coulson | @justincoulson | June 7, 2016 8:05 am

I don't remember what the yelling was all about—it was many years and many moves ago. I only remember that it was All. The. Time.

There was considerable distance—and bushland—between our houses. But the loud screaming still carried from their living room to ours on most days. It was shrill. It was angry. It seemed to me that it was constant. But I can't believe for a moment that it was ever really deserved.

Why do we yell?

Yelling is a habit. Our “shouty” neighbor had probably developed the habit of yelling because it got her a quick result. While I will never know the reason this mother yelled at her children, she seemed to flare up at the slightest provocation. She was my model “puffer-fish” parent, using her size and power to intimidate her children for every infraction, or whenever she felt challenged or threatened.

Research tells us that parents dislike yelling. Surveyed parents indicate that they see yelling, along with spanking, as being the least acceptable disciplinary techniques, but those same parents also acknowledge that they yell as much as they use time-out (which is used at a surprisingly high rate—especially for something that is generally ineffective). Despite the fact that we don't like yelling, we do it—and we do it a lot.

The question is “why”? Why are we so quick to yell at our children at home? We seem capable of controlling our volume (and aggression) in public; it is rare that we see a parent start shouting at his children in public, and it is rarer still to see an adult shout at another adult.

If you worked in an office where the boss summoned you to her office by shouting out your name, you'd probably look for ways to avoid her, even if you weren't in trouble. And if you were shouted at when you were in trouble, you'd probably start looking for a new employer.

Why won't they listen?

Many parents tell me, it's as if their children are deaf: “I ask them and ask them and they either ignore me, or it's like they're deaf—they only listen when I yell.” Of course, most typically developing children are in no way hard of hearing—watch what happens when your children are in earshot and you ask them quietly whether they would like a bowl of ice-cream ... or 20 dollars ... or just whisper the word “chocolate.” Rest assured, they will hear you. Unless a child has a genuine physical hearing problem, he or she is choosing not to listen—perhaps for very good reasons.

I do not believe that children are being disobedient when they don't listen. So are they being rebellious? Troublemakers? Ratbags? Why are they ignoring us?

Well, perhaps our children choose not to respond to us because we have trained them to wait until we yell before they act—we ask them to do something in a nice, respectful way, but they choose not to act immediately, and notice that nothing happens. So we ask again, nicely, and still don't get a response. Then,

finally, we yell.

Perhaps our children choose not to respond because we have trained them to wait until we yell before they act.

There may also be a second reason our children are not responding—because of the way we speak to them. Think about it. When you're in the middle of doing something that matters to you, and someone asks you to stop doing it and pay attention to them, how do you feel? Are you inclined to respond immediately and willingly?

Furthermore, what is the main reason we usually speak to our children? Most children will say when we call their name it means one of two things: I'm in trouble, or I'm going to be asked to do chores. So our children stop responding to us because our communication with them is typically only to correct or direct.

So the issue isn't really about getting our children to listen. They can hear us just fine—they just don't want to hear what we are constantly nagging them about. The issue is more about finding a way to invite our children to comply with basic requests in a timely manner—and keeping the volume down while we do it.

The effects of yelling

You may be surprised at the damage that can be done to your children when you yell.

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Michigan in the US conducted a two-year study and found that “severe verbal discipline” may have a profoundly negative impact on children's wellbeing. They found that tweens and teens whose parents yelled for discipline experienced increased behavioral issues (including being violent or being vandals), and that the impact of being yelled at regularly was as serious as if the children were being hit.

Watching a parent get in her child's face and scream at her while nose to nose is severe, especially when it is accompanied by name calling and other insults or threats.

Other research has shown that yelling at least 25 times in a 12-month period can have a negative impact on children's self-esteem, increasing the likelihood of depression and promoting aggression in children.

Try tracking your yelling

Not sure you yell at your children that much? It's a good idea to track how often you raise your voice at your children, and what the reasons for yelling are. Perhaps create a spreadsheet to record the date, the issue, your response, the outcome, and what you could have done differently.

There is power in creating a spreadsheet like this, regardless of the behavior you wish to eliminate. Firstly, it helps to identify how often you act in a certain way, as well as the circumstances surrounding that behavior. But the power comes in the fourth and fifth columns, as you consider the impact of your behavior and look for alternative strategies to employ in the future. This cognitive rehearsal strengthens the foundations of your new habit and helps to literally rewire your brain and establish new, more positive behavior or thinking patterns.

Practical anti-yelling strategies

So let's get really practical for a moment. If you rely on yelling, screaming, shouting or "speaking in an outdoors voice" more than you would like, the following strategies might help.

Go to your children: When you want your children's attention, walk to them. You would do it in an office with other adults or in nearly any context other than at home. This is respectful, mindful, and a much better way to get a relationship right than by yelling.

Speak to your children softly, calmly, and kindly, and your children will be more likely to respond positively because you have shown them respect. They will also respond because they can't pretend not to have heard you—you're standing right in front of them.

Timing is important

As a natural extension of being in our children's presence and seeing what they are doing, there may be times our requests might receive better responses if we give the children some advanced notice.

If what they are doing matters to them (and you're not late for the airport) you could suggest: "In the next few minutes I'll ask you to stop what you're doing to help me with a few things."

Perhaps we might say, "In 10 minutes' time, dinner will be ready. When I call you, I'd like you to come straight away so we can eat while the food is hot."

As my children have grown, I have found that asking them when I can expect to have their input and contribution can be helpful. We might put a deadline on our request, such as, "In the next 15 minutes I'll need your help in the kitchen," but we give the children the freedom to choose when they will help. When we recognize our children's preferences, and allow them some autonomy in what is to occur in their lives, we are calmer, our children are happier, and there is less yelling.

Get softer

This is probably my favorite non-yelling strategy. From time to time, even when we are with our children and trying to see the world through their eyes, they can be unresponsive. Their eyes won't leave the screen. They don't look up at us. We get frustrated.

The typical response is to make ourselves heard by getting bigger, louder and angrier; puffer-fish parenting. However, since we've discovered that our typical responses are usually the most unhelpful ways to respond, doing the opposite is often helpful.

Speak to your children softly, calmly, and kindly, and they will be more likely to respond positively.

If your children do not respond to your calm, kind and respectful requests for their attention, don't yell. Instead, speak more softly. If they still don't respond, quietly whisper their name and with peace in your heart and voice soft, hold their hand, look into their eyes and gently say, "I've asked you to do something three times now. Have you got any idea what it was?"

If they respond that they have no idea what you previously said, you can softly repeat it. If you're looking into their eyes at the time, you'll know whether they've understood. And if they do know, then you can invite them to do it—either now, or when they've finished what they're presently doing.

The irony is that when we shout, people switch off because it's offensive and we have just demonstrated that we have lost control of the situation. We are now fighting for power—in the position of underdog. But when we speak softly they strain to take in every word we say.

Your message will get across with focused soft speaking.

Call out to your children for other reasons

Parents spend a good deal of time communicating with children about things we don't like, or things that we don't like about them. We call out because bags have been left at the door, or clothes and shoes are still on the floor. We shout for our children's attention so we can delegate and dictate.

Our relationships swing too far towards endless correction and direction. Instead, try engaging in relationship-building and making things go right a little more. In so doing, you may find your children become much more open to being influenced when it's time for correction and direction.

I love yelling out my children's names and then saying, "I love you!" It means that it's okay to be loud sometimes, and even to yell. But the yelling is for good, rather than for my own convenience or frustration. My dad had a sign on our fridge when I was growing up that said, "Only speak loudly if the house is on fire."

The choice to stay calm—or at least to speak quietly—requires discipline and effort.

Dr. John Gottman, one of the world's most celebrated relationship experts, has suggested that when our interactions start with harshness (such as when we yell at someone), the likelihood of a positive outcome from the interaction is very low. Instead, negative outcomes are likely.

Every day, most of us will have many, many opportunities to decide whether or not to raise our voices or speak harshly. From tired, forgetful or obstinate children first thing in the morning, to busy, stressed and exhausted children in the evening, countless circumstances conspire against our best-laid plans for an efficiently executed routine and a happy family.

Even the other adults in our world exasperate us and leave us struggling to stay calm. Our own emotional baggage and stress adds fuel to the pile of emotional kindling that is ready to spontaneously combust over the slightest provocation.

The choice to stay calm—or at least to speak quietly—requires discipline and effort. It is rarely easy. But experience will likely remind you that when you are yelled at, things rarely improve. Likewise, when you yell at others, the outcomes are often sub-optimal. Making the choice to remain softly spoken is the preferable option for a happy family.

Take-home message

Yelling and anger leave us feeling lousy, our children feeling worthless, and our relationships damaged. Our children don't learn anything we want them to when we yell. What they learn, instead, is that yelling and puffer-fish impersonations are a sure-fire way of getting what we want in life and upsetting everyone at the same time. There are many other ways we can provide effective discipline to our children—with the volume kept down—that we will feel good about and that work.

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Endnotes:

1. *happyfamilies.com.au*: <https://www.happyfamilies.com.au>
2. 21 Days to a Happier Family: <https://www.harpercollins.com/9780733334818/21-days-to-a-happier-family>

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