How to Talk So Little Kids Will Listen

A Survival Guide to Life with Children Ages 2–7

Joanna Faber & Julie King

Illustrated by Coco Faber, Tracey Faber, and Sam Faber Mannin
REMINDER: Tools for Handling Emotions

1. Acknowledge Feelings with Words

   “You were looking forward to that playdate. How disappointing!”

   “It can be so frustrating when train tracks fall apart.”

2. Acknowledge Feelings with Writing

   “Oh no! We don’t have the ingredients we need! Let’s make a shopping list.”

   “You really want that underwater Lego set. Let’s write that down on your wish list.”

3. Acknowledge Feelings with Art

   “You seem so sad.” (Draw a stick figure with big tears, or simply hand over a crayon or pencil.)

   “You are this angry!” (Make angry lines or rip and crumple paper.)

4. Give in Fantasy What You Cannot Give in Reality

   “I wish we had a million billion more hours to play.”
5. Acknowledge Feelings with (Almost) Silent Attention

“Ugh!” “Mmm.” “Ooh.” “Huh.”

- *All* feelings can be accepted. *Some* actions must be limited!
- Sit on those “buts.” Substitute: “The problem is . . .” or “Even though you know . . .”
- Match the emotion. Be dramatic!
- Resist the urge to ask questions of a distressed child.
**REMINDER: Tools for Engaging Cooperation**

1. Be Playful

   - *Make it a game.*
     
     “Can we get all the cars into the box before the timer beeps? Ready . . . set . . . go!”

   - *Make inanimate objects talk.*
     
     “I’m an empty sock. I need a foot in me!”

   - *Use silly voices and accents.*
     
     “I . . . am . . . your . . . robot . . . Must . . . buckle . . . seat . . . belt . . . now.”

   - *Pretend!*
     
     “We need to climb this slippery mountain into the carseat.”

   - *Play the incompetent fool.*
     
     “Oh dear, where does this sleeve go? Over your head? No? On the arm? This is so confusing! Thank you for helping me!”
2. Offer a Choice

“Do you want to hop to the tub like a bunny, or crawl to the tub like a crab?”

3. Put the Child in Charge

“Johnny, would you set the timer and let us know when it’s time to leave?”

4. Give Information

“Tissues go in the trash.”

5. Say It with a Word (or a Gesture)

“Trash!”

6. Describe What You See

“I see most of the blocks put away in the toy box. There are only a few blocks left to go.”

7. Describe How You Feel

“I don’t like food thrown on the floor.”

8. Write a Note

“Put me on your head before riding. Love, your bike helmet.”
9. Take Action Without Insult

“I’m putting the paint away for now. I can’t let you splatter the other kids.”

• Don’t turn a choice into a threat. Make sure both options are acceptable to you and your child.

• Appreciate progress before describing what’s left to do.

• When expressing anger or frustration, use the word I, avoid the word you.

• Express strong anger sparingly. It can feel like an attack.
REMINDER: Tools for Resolving Conflict

1. Express Your Feelings . . . Strongly!

“HEY, I don’t like to see people being pushed!”

2. Show Your Child How to Make Amends

“Your sister got scared on the top of the slide. Let’s do something to make her feel better. Do you want to offer her some pretzels? Do you think she’d like to play with your sand bucket?”

3. Offer a Choice

“We’re going to give the slide a rest for now. I can see you’re in no mood to wait for a turn. You can swing on the swings or you can play in the sandbox. You decide.”

4. Take Action Without Insult

“We’re heading home. We’ll try the playground another day. I’m too worried about children getting hurt right now.”

5. Try Problem-Solving

Step One: Acknowledge your child’s feelings

“I can see that you don’t like your hand held in the parking lot. It makes your fingers feel squeezed.”
Step Two: Describe the problem
“The problem is, I worry about cars hitting children in the parking lot.”

Step Three: Ask for ideas
“We need some ideas so we can go back to the park and have a good time without people getting mad or scared. What can we do?”

Step Four: Decide which ideas you both like
“So you like the idea of holding on to my sleeve and leading me to the playground. Let’s circle that one.”

Step Five: Try out your solutions
“Here we are at the parking lot. Grab my sleeve and show me which way to go!”

Very Important Points

• If nothing is working, you may have to reconsider your basic expectations.
• Show respect for the conflict. Don’t minimize the problem.
• Remove the disputed object temporarily.
• You don’t have to wait for a problem to occur in order to use problem-solving. When possible, plan ahead!
REMINDER: Tools for Praise and Appreciation

1. Describe What You See

   “I see green lines that are zooming up and down the page. And look how they connect all these red shapes!”

2. Describe the Effect on Others

   “The baby loves it when you make those funny sounds. I see a big smile on her face.”

3. Describe Effort

   “You kept working on that button until you got it into that little buttonhole.”

4. Describe Progress

   “You sounded out each of the letters and you put them together. You read a whole sentence!”
• Consider asking questions or starting a conversation instead of praising.

• Sometimes acknowledging feelings can be more helpful than praise.

• Give a child a new picture of himself.

• Resist the urge to praise by comparison.
REMINDER: Tools for Kids Who Are Differently Wired

1. Join Them in Their World

“Can I play the Bubble Game with you? Will you show me how?”

2. Take Time to Imagine What Your Child Is Experiencing

“So to you, the seams of the socks are very irritating!”

3. Put into Words What Kids Want to Say

“You bad old rain! You took away Johnny’s recess!”

4. Adjust Expectations: Manage the Environment Instead of the Child

“Let’s take a diaper vacation. We need some time to relax and not worry about peeing in the potty.”

5. Use Alternatives to the Spoken Word: Notes, Checklists, Pictures, Songs, Gestures
6. Tell Them What They Can Do, Instead of What They Can’t

“You can throw your stuffed animals.”

7. Be Playful!

“It’s time to put away the blocks. I need help from the human wheelbarrow!”

• Don’t expect new skills to be used consistently.

REMINDER: The Basics—Conditions Under Which the Tools Won’t Work

• Lack of food
• Lack of sleep
• Need for recovery time
• Feeling overwhelmed (the last straw syndrome)
• Lack of developmental or experiential readiness
REMINDER: Food Fights

Resist the urge to . . .

. . . insist that your child clean his or her plate, eat a specific food, or eat a predetermined amount.
. . . offer dessert as a reward for eating healthy food, or withhold it as a punishment for not eating.
. . . be a short-order cook.
. . . label your child a *picky eater*.
. . . make food a battleground!

*Instead you can . . .*

1. **Acknowledge Feelings**

   “Even though you usually like chicken, you’re not in the mood for it tonight.”

2. **Offer Choices**

   - Put an empty plate in front of your child and let him serve himself, or ask for what he wants if he’s too young to serve himself.
   - Serve some of the meal as simple separates so kids can make choices about what they put on their plates.
   - Offer a simple alternative if kids don’t want the “grown-up” food—peanut butter sandwich, bread and cheese, hard-boiled egg, raw carrots, red pepper.
3. **Manage the Environment**

   Keep sweets and sugary drinks out of sight. Make it easy to avoid temptation!

4. **Put the Child in Charge**

   Let kids have as much involvement as possible in planning, shopping, as well as preparing the meal, if you can tolerate some food landing on the floor. (Your dog will thank you!)

5. **Give Information**

   Let kids know that “tastes change,” so they don’t feel stuck with their limited palate. Tell them, “You might want to give this a try when you’re ready.”
REMINDER: Morning Madness

1. Be Playful

   (Shoe talking.) “I don’t want that foot in me. Nooooo!”
   (Parent talking.) “You’d better get on Luke’s foot right now. You’re making him late!”

2. Offer a Choice

   “Do you want to walk to the car the regular way or backward?”

3. Put the Child in Charge

   “Can you set the timer? I need you to let me know when it’s time to go out the door.”

4. Try Problem-Solving

   “It’s not easy to remember all the things we have to do in the morning. What do you think about making a chart?”

5. Acknowledge Feelings

   “It isn’t easy to get out of a warm, cozy bed. It’s nice to snuggle for a few more minutes!”
REMINDER: Sibling Rivalry

1. Accept Feelings

“It can be frustrating to have a baby sister!”

2. **Give Wishes in Fantasy:** Let the older child pretend to be a baby

“Come sit on my lap and be my super baby.”

3. **Describe What You See:** Notice and appreciate the positive interactions between siblings

“You figured out how to cheer up your sister when she was crying.”

4. **Put the Child in Charge** so that he has an opportunity to see himself differently

“Can you pick a board book for the baby? She likes it when you read to her.”

5. **Reconnect With Your Child**

- **Plan for Special One-on-One Time**

  “Would you like to make cookies when the baby takes her nap? Or snuggle up and read your pop-up truck book?”

- **Tell the Older Child Stories About his Baby Days**

  “I remember when you . . .”
6. **Take Action Without Insult**: Avoid casting a child in the role of aggressor

   “We need to separate. I don’t want anyone getting hurt!”

7. **Try Problem-Solving**: Resist the urge to take sides and don’t minimize the problem!

   “Jamie wants to build by himself and Kara wants to touch the blocks. This is a tough problem. We need ideas.”
REMINDER: Shopping with Children

1. Put the Child in Charge

Have him help make a shopping list and gather groceries to put in the cart.

Give her an allowance: “You can bring your dollar to the grocery store in case you see something you want to buy for yourself.”

2. Offer a Choice

“Should we get the spiral pasta or the elbow pasta? You pick!”

3. Acknowledge Feelings with a Wish List

Thomas’s Wish List:
Star Wars jumbo Lego set

4. Give Information—Let Children Know What to Expect

“We’re going shopping for Elena’s birthday present today. Let’s bring the wish list in case you see something you’d like for yourself.”
REMINDER: Lies

1. **Describe What You See**: Instead of asking or accusing, state the obvious.

   “I see chocolate on your face.”

2. **Describe How You Feel**

   “I’m upset that the cake was eaten! I was going to serve it for dessert when our friends come for dinner tonight!”

3. **Acknowledge Feelings**

   “It’s not easy to resist cake. I bet you wish you hadn’t eaten it.”

4. **Try Problem-Solving**: Make a plan for the future

   “Next time you’re tempted, let me know. I’m sure we can find a way to help you wait.”

5. **Adjust Expectations**: Manage the environment instead of the child

   Think to yourself, *The next time I buy chocolate cake, I’ll put it out of sight until it’s time for dessert so it’s not so tempting.*

6. **Help the Child Make Amends**

   “We’re going to need something for dessert when our friends come over. Can you get out some cookies and arrange them nicely on a plate?”
**REMINDER: Parents Have Feelings, Too!**

1. **Express Your Feelings . . . Strongly**

   Instead of, "You’re being rude!"
   Try, "I don’t like being told I’m mean. It makes me mad."

2. **Tell Them What They Can Do, Instead of What They Can’t**

   “You can tell me, ‘Mommy, I’m disappointed! I wanted to go!’”

3. **Don’t Forget the Basics—Give Yourself and Your Child Time to Recover**

   “I’ll talk to you about it after dinner. Right now I’m too upset.”

---

**REMINDER: Tattling**

1. **Acknowledge Feelings**

   “Jenna didn’t like being poked. That hurt!”

2. **Help the Child Make Amends** (without scolding)

   “Let’s get a broom and sweep up the mess.”

3. **Try Problem-Solving**

   “How will we remember not to touch the stove dials? We need ideas.”
**REMINDER: Cleanup**

1. **Be Playful**

(Shoes talking.) “Pretty please, put me in the closet with my friends.”

“How many minutes will it take to toss all the Legos into the bucket? You can set the timer. Ready... set... GO!”

2. **Offer a Choice**

“Do you want to be in charge of putting away the books or the cars?”

3. **Write a Note**

“Please hang me on the hook. Love, Your Coat.”

4. **Describe What You See**

“I see orange peels on the floor.”

5. **Give Information**

“Peels belong in the compost.”

6. **Say It with a Word**

7. **Describe Progress**

“You got that whole pile of dirty laundry in the basket! All that’s left to put away are the cars and books.”

8. **Describe What You See with Appreciation**

“Wow, look at this big cleanup you did. The floor was covered with dirty laundry and train tracks, and now it’s a pleasure to walk on!”
REMINDER: Doctor’s Orders

1. Acknowledge Feelings

Instead of, “Come on, it’s not that bad. Just let her do it, and it’ll be over.”
Try, “It can be scary to think about someone sticking a needle in your arm.”

Instead of, “Don’t cry. You’re a big boy.”
Try, “That hurt! You didn’t like that!”

2. Offer in Fantasy What You Can’t Give in Reality

“I wish they could put the medicine inside a lollipop. You’d eat one a day for a week and then you’d never get sick.”

3. Offer a Choice

“Do you want the shot in your left arm or your right?”
“Do you want to sit next to me, or on my lap?”

4. Give Information

“The shots are quick. They’re over in the time it takes to clap twice. Like this (Clap! Clap!).”

“The shots put tiny little fighters in your blood, called antibodies. They fight against tiny germs so you don’t get sick.”
5. **Try Problem-Solving**

*Parent:* What would make it easier to get through these injections? Would it help to have something to look forward to when you’re done?
*Kid:* Can we get peanut M&M’s? I could eat a green one as soon as the shot is over.
*Parent:* Let’s do that!

6. **Be Playful**

“I can see the medicine going down your throat into your stomach. And now it’s heading down your leg to your toes!”

7. **Take Action Without Insult**

“I’m going to hold you on my lap while the doctor gives you the injection. I know you don’t like this.”
REMINDER: Shy Kids

1. Acknowledge Feelings

“It can be hard to walk into a new house filled with relatives. Lots of people want to say hello to you. That can feel scary.”

2. Adjust Expectations: Give a child something to do instead of pressuring him to be social.

“You can carry in the chips and put them in the bowl for people to eat.”

3. Offer a Choice

“Do you want to sit on the couch and watch the kids set up the trains? Or do you want to have a snack with the grown-ups first?”

4. Be Playful

(Sock puppet talking.) “Hi there! Would you like a corn chip?”

5. Put the Child in Charge

“Jamie will join you when he’s ready.”
**REMINDER: Little Runaways**

1. **Adjust Expectations: Manage the Environment Instead of the Child**

   Avoid outings that seem like fun but will be more stress than pleasure with a small child. There will be plenty of opportunities to see holiday decorations at the mall or enjoy an outdoor concert by the river when your child is a little bit older.

2. **Acknowledge Your Child’s Feelings**

   “You don’t like it when your hand is squeezed. You want to be free to look around.”

3. **Describe Your Own Feelings**

   “I worry that drivers backing out of parking spaces can’t see children.”

4. **Offer a Choice**

   “You can ride in the cart or you can help push.”

5. **Be Playful**

   “We need to stick close together. It’s a jungle out there. I think I just saw the tail of a lion behind that car!”
6. Try Problem-Solving

“Let’s think of a secret signal we can use that means we have to get to each other as fast as possible.”

7. Take Action Without Insult

Grab your kid and go home. “We can’t stay here. I have to watch the baby and I’m too worried about losing sight of you by the river.”
**REMINDER: Hitting, Pinching, Poking, Punching, Pushing**

1. **Take Action Without Insult**
   - *Make everybody safe*
     - “We need to separate!”
   - *Attend to injuries*
     - “Let me kiss that bump. Do you want a piece of ice for your head?”

2. **Express Your Feelings Strongly**
   - “I don’t like seeing Isabel hurt!”
   - “That makes me very upset!”

3. **Help the Child Make Amends**
   - “Isabel needs something to make her feel better. Can you find her a toy? Or do you think she’d like a strawberry?”
4. **Acknowledge Feelings**

“It can be very frustrating to have a little sister grabbing your things.”

“It’s not easy to resist hitting or pushing when you’re mad!”

5. **Give Information**

“No pushing allowed in this house. Daddy is not allowed to push me. You are not allowed to push your sister, and she is not allowed to push you. And I am not allowed to push either of you—unless you need a push on a swing!”

6. **Try Problem-Solving**

“Sometimes your little sister can drive you crazy! What can a person do when his sister is bothering him? We need ideas.”
REMINDER: Sleep

1. Acknowledge Feelings

“Sometimes it isn’t easy to fall asleep. It can be scary to lie in bed in the dark.”

2. Be Playful

“I need to smooth out these terrible lumps in your bed!” (Press down on legs and arms of child.)

3. Try Problem-Solving

“Let’s see what ideas we can come up with for staying in your bed at night. A special night-light? A picture book by your bed? A recording of songs or stories?”

4. Take Action Without Insult

“Mommy and Daddy need to sleep! I’m putting you back in your bed. We’ll play in the morning.”
REMINDER: When Parents Get Angry!

A. In the moment, if you must yell, use your tools . . . LOUDLY!

1. Say It in a Word

“CAR!!!”

2. Give Information

“BROTHERS ARE NOT FOR KICKING!!”

3. Describe How You Feel

“I GET VERY UPSET WHEN I SEE A BABY BEING PINCHED!!”

4. Describe What You See

“I SEE PEOPLE GETTING HURT!!”

5. Take Action without Insult

“I can’t allow sand throwing! WE ARE LEAVING!!”
B. When the moment has passed and everyone’s safe, take care of yourself.

Do whatever works best for you: run around the block; take deep breaths; take a time-out for yourself (lock yourself in another room); call a friend and vent; email a friend; write in a journal; hug a dog; turn on your favorite music; attend to your own basic needs—sleep and food.

C. Reconnect and try problem-solving.

“That was no fun. You didn’t like getting yelled at. And I was really mad about being late. What can we do next time?”

D. Seek help if you feel the anger is too much.
REMINDER: Troubleshooting

1. When a child is too upset to cooperate, go back to Acknowledging Feelings

   “You don’t even want to think about visiting your friend another time. You were looking forward to going today!”

   - Make sure your tone of voice matches the emotion

   “That’s so disappointing!”

   - Try a grunt instead of words

   “UGH!” “Mmph!”

   - Put your child’s thoughts into words

   “Stupid Legos! They should stick together and stay together!”

   - Tell the story of what happened

   “You worked for a long time on that spaceship. You used blue bricks for the base, and red bricks for the lights, and it was almost ready to launch! All it needed was the fins on the rockets. . . .”
2. Give your child **Time to Recover** (and give yourself a break!)

   “I can see how sad you are. I’ll be in the kitchen making dinner. Come join me when you’re ready.”

3. Help a child climb out of the pit of despair by **Acknowledging Feelings**, **Giving Information**, and **Offering Choices**

   “Oh no, the skin got ripped! That hurts! Good thing skin knows how to repair itself. It’s getting busy right now growing more skin cells to cover that poor knee and make it as good as new. How many days do you think it will take? What kind of Band-Aid should we cover it with?”

4. **Take Action** and stick to your values; if you regularly cave in to whining and complaints, the tools won’t work

   “You wish we could have candy for breakfast! I’m putting it out of sight. The choices are cereal or eggs.”

5. **Check on “The Basics”**

   Is your child lacking food or sleep, or feeling overwhelmed? Is your child developmentally ready to do what you’re expecting?
Additional Resources

How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
Liberated Parents, Liberated Children, by Faber and Mazlish
siblings Without Rivalry, by Faber and Mazlish
Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful, by Donna Goertz
Kids, Parents and Power Struggles, by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka
The Spirited Child, by Kurcinka
Playful Parenting, by Lawrence D. Cohen
The Siblings’ Busy Book, by Lisa Hanson and Heather Kempskie
The Happy Sleeper, by Heather Turgeon and Julie Wright
Unconditional Parenting, by Alfie Kohn
Punished by Rewards, by Kohn
Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism, by Barry M. Prizant
You Can’t Say You Can’t Play, by Vivian Paley
Your Baby and Child, by Penelope Leach