

Falling on deaf ears

By Joanna Nesbit



On any given school morning, my 11-year-old daughter was ready to leave ten minutes before departure time. Her 8-year-old brother, on the other hand, could be found lounging in the living room, pajama-clad, teeth unbrushed.

"Ty, we're leaving in ten minutes! You have to get dressed," Leah would bark. She abhors being late (she's never late), and every morning Ty unwittingly sent her to the edge with his glacial pace.

Not that I hadn't reminded him several times. Yet not until Leah barked at him, or I did, would he begin to dress. But jeans took a while. Socks—well, there were two of them, after all. And shoes. Hmmm. By the back door? Upstairs? At the bottom of the cavernous shoe basket like some ancient maritime disaster?

This is a kid who can play chess with great concentration, outwitting you to put your king in a complicated checkmate. Who can follow a recipe's directions to produce a result everyone wants to eat. Who can sit and listen to a book for hours, throwing in germane observations now and again.

Why couldn't he get out the door on time?

I tried a list, posting one next to the front door that detailed all the items Ty needed to complete or gather before leaving for school. It didn't work.

So I fell back on reminders. "Time to get dressed, Ty." "Put your clothes on, please." "Get dressed." "NOW."

"Mommy, you don't have to yell at me." Ty would say, crestfallen.

What is it with boys? Or is it kids? Or moms who aren't strict enough?

Soon after, I read somewhere boys may have a harder time hearing than girls, particularly the softer voices typically used by women. Aha, just speak louder.

Use Fewer Words

Well, no. Yes, boys are more attuned to louder and lower sounds than girls, and their cochleas (inner ears) are longer than girls', so they don't hear sound as quickly as girls do. But the picture is more complex—no surprise—than hearing ability. According to Abigail Norfleet James, psychologist and author of *Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School*, you don't have to speak louder, but you do need to speak firmly and use fewer words. Not because boys can't hear us, but because they may not be interested in what we're saying, at least not all the extraneous verbiage moms tend to throw in (nor are girls, my daughter would say). And they aren't as apt to take us seriously if we do throw it in.

I'm talking too much?

"Women are oxytocin-driven humans who want relationships, and we want our kids to like us," says Kathy Stevens, co-author of *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons from Falling Behind in School and Life*. "We think the more we talk, the more we connect. Mothers use a lot more words than boys need from us. As boys get a little older, they pick and choose, and they tune out what they consider to be the noise in between."

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Give the Bottom Line

Boys tend to be less verbal than girls until about age 10, some boys much longer, and they can get lost in words, especially when those words start to walk in circles like mine do. Even if they're very verbal, as my son is, boys don't want all the reasons why they *should* do something. Boys want the bottom line, says James, a veteran boys' school teacher, in part because they have a harder time than girls remembering auditory information. Of course, boys do need us to talk to them, especially when they're young, for verbal skills to develop. Chat to him about his favorite book, but skip the to-do list when you want him to feed the bunny.

So, not only does Ty not need to listen to the language version of an upset stomach, but it appears I'm actually creating a bad habit by expecting him to. In short, I've been giving Ty tutorials in the fine art of tuning out.

Strategize Together

James advises being specific about the behavior you want your child to stop, and specific about what will happen if it doesn't

(and yes, follow through). She also suggests bringing your child into the problem-solving process. "The plan needs to be his idea; otherwise, he may just agree to get you off his back," says James. For example: "Your toys need to be put away, how do you plan on getting this done?"

So I sat Ty down and asked him what would help his mornings go more smoothly without me nagging. We brainstormed, landing on an easy-to-read chart with pictures—not a list of tiny words—and tasks broken down into time increments (his idea). If he ran late, he would miss out on playing in the afternoon.

The chart worked. But I suspect more than the chart, it was the simple act of taking action that changed the flow. Ty is spared the naggy reminders, and not once has he missed out on playing in the afternoon. I guess I finally sound like I mean it.

Joanna Nesbit is thankful her daughter is now a middle schooler and leaves an hour before Ty, taking the morning panic with her.

Tips for Getting (and Keeping) your Child's Attention

Psychologist Abigail James and Kathy Stevens, Executive Director of the Gurian Institute for parents and educators, offer the following tips:

- Put yourself on his level by squatting next to him (under fives) or sitting in a chair while he's standing.
- Try touching his shoulder, if necessary, to redirect his focus.
- Use fewer words, a firm voice, and directive language without lecturing. "It's time to get your shoes on." Allow a little transition time.
- Don't require eye contact. Looking a boy in the eye while discussing a problem makes him uneasy, says James. Try a joint task such as sorting laundry for a meaningful discussion.
- Use positive language ("You're almost ready to go") rather than confrontational language ("You're not leaving the house until you [fill in the blank]"), so he doesn't begin to see every task as a negative.
- Skip the big picture. Boys will feel overwhelmed and tune you out. "Clean your room" is the big picture. Be specific about what you want him to pick up, and if he's young, consider keeping him company. By middle school, you can say "It's your job to do such-and-such," and let him decide when and how he does it, says James.