



**MY FAMILY  
COACH**

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# How to Help Your Child Listen to You



# About My Family Coach

We all have times when we need some parent support. My Family Coach is a free website giving you all the help you need for every stage of your child's development, from these first years, right through to leaving school, and everything in between.

We'll support you through the tough times, inspire you with new ideas, and share practical tips to make parenting that little bit easier.



## About Jonathan Newport

Jonathan is an internationally recognised behaviour specialist with over 30 years of experience. He started his career in a mainstream primary school and it was here that he developed a passion for puzzle solving with children who were struggling to 'fit' in their own classes.

This led him to work across a range of primary and secondary schools, including 17 years leading Barnardo's largest residential special school.

# Contents

## Chapter 1: How can I help my child listen to me?

- Why are they not paying attention?
- Ways to help your child pay attention when you speak
- Useful resource

## Chapter 2: What can I do when my child says no?

- This then that
- Think about why they're refusing
- What to do if your child refuses to do as you've asked
- Useful resource

## Chapter 3: How can I reduce shouting?

- Looking at ourselves first
- Helping your child calm down
- Useful resource

## Chapter 4: Why don't ultimatums work?

- Why are you giving ultimatums?
- What can you do instead of giving ultimatums?
- Useful resource





# Chapter 1:

How can I help my child listen to me?

**When we think of children paying attention, it normally means expecting them to stop what they're doing and sit still. You might feel they're not paying attention if they're squirming in their seat, fidgeting, doodling, or playing with something.**

However, children are made to be active. They find it difficult to sit still for any length of time. They may be listening even though their body is moving. Asking them to repeat an instruction back is an easy way to check if they're paying attention to you.

### **Why are they not paying attention?**

There are many reasons why your child might not be paying attention when you speak. When your child is intently doing something, they may literally not hear you – this is something adults are guilty of too! They can also find it hard to stop playing a computer game or activity they enjoy. They can hear you, but really don't want to stop what they're doing.

If your child feels stressed or under pressure, they may struggle to focus on what you're saying. This happens to us too when we're trying to juggle the demands of home, work, and busy everyday life. We get distracted and our children do too.

If you notice your child doesn't hear your instructions, mishears you, or increasingly doesn't pay attention to you, it's worth making an appointment with your doctor for a hearing check.



## Ways to help your child pay attention when you speak

If your child doesn't pay attention when you speak, there are some simple techniques you can use to help them focus and remember what you've said:

- 1 Start by saying their name to catch their attention: Instead of saying, "Can you tidy your bedroom, Karim?" you might say, "Karim, it's time to tidy your bedroom."
- 2 Keep instructions short and to the point: If there's a lot for them to remember, try asking them to do one thing first and then listen to the next instruction.
- 3 Avoid long lectures: Teens in particular are good at zoning out of conversations if they feel they've heard it all before.
- 4 Ask them to pause or turn off distractions like the TV, radio, or video games: They may find it easier to pay attention if there's no background noise.
- 5 Think about eye contact: Some children listen better when they look at you, however for some this can feel uncomfortable and make it harder for them to listen. We often ask children to look at us when we talk. Think about whether this works for your child.

If you feel your child isn't paying attention because they're stressed or worried about something, talk to them about it. Tell them what you've noticed. Listen carefully to any worries they have and let them take the lead on how they could solve the problem.



### Useful resource

To find out more about how to have respectful conversations, listen to our [podcast episode with expert guest Dr Emma Clarke](#). She explains ways you can be "respectfully confident" to improve family communication and get everyone listening to each other.





## **Chapter 2:**

What can I do when  
my child says no?

## It's hard when your child refuses to do as you've asked. You may feel backed into a corner, powerless, and forced to give increasingly severe punishments to get them to do as you've said.

Some children outright refuse. Others completely ignore you or pretend they haven't heard. It's tempting to give up and just do it yourself. You might ask yourself if it's worth making a fuss about, particularly if they're creating a scene.

It's easy for us to feel like we're in a constant battle, but there are ways to reduce confrontation and help your child do as you've asked without it feeling like a fight.

### This then that

Often, we can be flexible about when children have to do something and in what order they do it, and this is a great way to reduce conflict. However, there are times when you do need your child to do something straight away, particularly when you're under a time pressure.

The phrase, "When you do this, then you can do that," is useful at these times.

#### For example:

- When you make your bed, then you can play with your toys.
- When you put your plate in the dishwasher, then you can watch TV.
- When you put on your coat, then you can get your scooter.

This approach can work well if your child often gives a response like, "I'll do it later," or, "I'm just finishing this first". It's a subtle reminder that they can get the job done quickly and then do something they enjoy.



## Think about why they're refusing

There's a reason behind every behaviour. Thinking about why your child is saying no or ignoring you can help you understand their actions. You might find a physical reason behind it because they feel tired, hungry, or thirsty.

It could be that they don't understand why you're making them do it. Explaining the "why" of what you're asking them to do often will help them accept it.

Alternatively, they may have a reason why they won't do as you ask, that you can help them explain. For example, if your child said, "I'm not picking up my toys!" and you realise it's because they're still playing, you could help them ask, "Please may I keep out these toys for a bit longer because I'm still playing with them?"

## What to do if your child refuses to do as you've asked

Giving limited choices is a helpful way to let your child feel they have a say in decisions while still getting the results you're after.

You might ask them:

- Are you going to tidy your bedroom before or after lunch?
- Would you like peas or sweetcorn with dinner?
- Shall we drive or walk to your friend's house?

Limited choices work best when your child has just two options to choose between. Make sure you are happy with whichever choice they decide.



### Useful resource

If you struggle with big outbursts from your child when you ask them to do something, check out our free video series, called [The Ask](#) on the My Family Coach website. It's full of helpful ideas to help the whole family talk and listen to each other more effectively.





## Chapter 3:

How can I  
reduce shouting?

**When children experience big emotions, they often respond in a big way, like shouting. Adults do it too. Shouting is an instinctive reaction for many of us when we feel angry, frustrated, or upset. When your child shouts, it can be frustrating, embarrassing, and annoying, particularly if you're in a public space and feel watched and perhaps judged by others.**

Young children in particular can struggle to understand how they're feeling and start shouting when they're frustrated or upset, but you may also find your child becomes more easily irritated, or angry as they go through the emotional and physical changes brought on by puberty.

We don't want our children to suppress these big emotions – that's not healthy. We all feel angry sometimes. Instead, we can help them find ways to calm down before they lose control and start shouting.

## **Looking at ourselves first**

When your child does shout, it's easy to shout back. Your volume naturally rises until you're screaming at each other. Instead, try to use a calm and quieter voice. If you can feel your temper rising, try taking a few deep breaths or counting to twenty before you answer. If it's safe to do so, you could walk away for a few minutes and come back when you feel more in control.

Children learn how to behave from us. If they see us shouting at each other all the time, they pick up the same behaviour habits. If we can model calmer ways to deal with challenging situations, they can learn them too.



## Helping your child calm down

Getting calm starts with your child recognising how they're feeling. Just naming an emotion can reduce how intensely your child experiences it. Instead of talking about their behaviour, focus on the feelings behind it. You could say, "I think something is upsetting you. Can you tell me about it?"

Rather than reacting when your child is already angry, you can often spot the signs they are starting to feel this way and take action before they feel overwhelmed. Teach your child a few calming down strategies they can use when they start to feel angry. Every child is different, so experiment to see what works best for them. Praise them whenever you see them using a calming down strategy.

### Popular strategies for calming down include:

- Slow deep breathing: There are great ideas for these online
- A sport or exercise they can do at home, like football practise
- Get outside for a walk or some fresh air
- Distract themselves with a calming activity or game
- Have a drink or a healthy snack
- Listen to music
- Colouring and drawing



If your child feels the need to do something physical when they're angry, find a safe way for them to release their emotions. Punching a pillow, throwing a ball against a wall, or ripping something up (with permission) are all ways to let out feelings of anger without hurting anyone.



### Useful resource

To find out more about anger, listen to our podcast episode [Behaviour & Anger](#) featuring expert guest Rachel Thynne, a teacher for an attachment-awareness setting for pupils with Social and Emotional Mental Health difficulties. She is also author of the book *Behaviour Barriers and Beyond*.

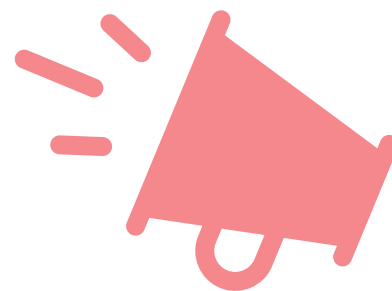




## Chapter 4:

Why don't ultimatums work?

## What do we mean by giving ultimatums? They sound like this:



“If you don’t do your homework right now, I’m going to...”

- Take away all your pocket money for good
- Cancel your birthday party
- Stop you seeing your friends again

Sound familiar? We’ve all been there. Those moments of pure frustration when you’ve run out ideas to get your child to do something. Out of desperation, you issue an ultimatum. But what do you do when that doesn’t work?

Let’s look at the problem of giving ultimatums and what you can do instead.

## Why are you giving ultimatums?

Ultimatums are a big final demand, “Do this, or else!” We use them when we run out of other ideas.

### They often follow this pattern:

- 1 You ask your child nicely to do something: “Please can you tidy up your bedroom.”
- 2 You repeat the instruction: “I’m still waiting for you to get that bedroom tidy.”
- 3 Then you offer a reward if they do it: “If you tidy up your bedroom, you can get that game you want.”
- 4 Now you shout: “Get your bedroom tidy, RIGHT NOW!”
- 5 Finally, you issue an ultimatum: “If you don’t tidy that bedroom, you’re not going out at the weekends ever again!”

We tend to work up to giving ultimatums and use them when we feel angry and out of control. It’s easy to say things we don’t really mean because we feel frustrated.

Ultimatums do sometimes work. But when they do, it’s often based on a fear of the consequences. That can cause tension in our relationship with our children, and can even make them frightened of us.

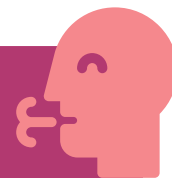
But often, when we give an ultimatum, we’re not actually prepared to go through with it. And children are quick to pick up on that. They know you’re not really going to cancel their birthday or throw away their computer games, so they ignore the ultimatum. And then you’re stuck.



## What can you do instead of giving ultimatums?

Removing ultimatums doesn't mean letting your child get away with everything or allowing them to ignore your instructions. It actually helps you stay more in control of challenging situations and get the results you want.

### Here are five practical alternatives that work:



- 1 Give yourself time.**  
When we feel angry, we often say things we don't mean. We go to extremes. Giving yourself some time to calm down helps you think rationally about the situation. Try taking a few deep breaths before speaking, go and make a cup of tea, or just walk away for a few moments until you feel back under control.
- 2 Break instructions down.**  
Big instructions like "clean your bedroom" seem huge and unmanageable. Your child might think it will take them a long time to do it. Try breaking it down into small, easily achieved tasks instead. Keep it simple and thank them for each small step they achieve. Even the grumpiest teenager enjoys hearing a bit of praise and appreciation when they've done something.
- 3 Think about why this is happening.**  
Behaviour is your child's way of communicating. Often, they can't put their feelings into words. If you're getting a big reaction, think about why that might be happening. It could be as simple as them having made plans to do something which they feel you're stopping them from doing.
- 4 Decide consequences in advance.**  
Make it clear to your child what will happen if they choose not to do as you've asked. This is not a threat, but the simple natural consequence of their choice. For example, if they choose not to put on their coat, then they're going to feel cold. If they choose not to do homework, then they will get told off at school.
- 5 Make it their choice.**  
We can't force our children to do things. If your child refuses to do as you've asked and is prepared to accept the consequences, that is their choice. Don't give them lots of warnings or empty threats. Later, when they're calm, talk about what happened and how it made you and them feel. You can encourage them to make the right choice next time. Keep focused on the positives rather than dwelling on problems.



### Useful resource

Journaling is a useful way to spot patterns in your child's behaviour, particularly if you're not sure why they are behaving in a particular way. [My Family Journal](#) is a free app that's great for this. You might spot particular triggers behind their behaviour, such as when they feel hungry, tired, or overstimulated by their environment.



Being a parent is the hardest job in the world.  
But we've found information available online  
is often confusing, misleading, or just  
downright wrong. We're here to fix that.

My Family Coach is a free website full of expert support brought to you by Team Teach. We have over 20 years' experience helping schools, families, and health and social care sectors. We've transformed 8,000 schools and care settings, training over 100,000 people each year. We've even won awards for our training courses. Now we're here to support parents and carers, too.

Our website is full of helpful Quick Reads, podcast episodes and Video Talks with more added all the time. Come and see how we can support your family.

Register for free at [myfamilycoach.com](https://myfamilycoach.com)

