

Positive Parenting of Preschoolers

Interrupting

All children need lots of attention from their parents. However, all parents occasionally need uninterrupted time, such as when they are on the telephone, talking with another adult or doing something that requires concentration. At these times it is reasonable to expect preschoolers to occupy themselves and not to interrupt. At other times it is reasonable to expect preschoolers to say 'excuse me' and wait when they want attention rather than to demand attention. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your preschooler to occupy themselves when you are busy, to get your attention in an acceptable way and to wait until you can stop what you are doing.

What Is Interrupting?

Interrupting involves breaking into another person's conversation or activity and preventing them from continuing. This is common in preschoolers. Children often approach adults for information, help or to share what they are doing. These are important learning opportunities. Interrupting becomes a problem at times when parents are busy and cannot be disturbed. It is also a problem when children demand attention.

Why Do Children Interrupt?

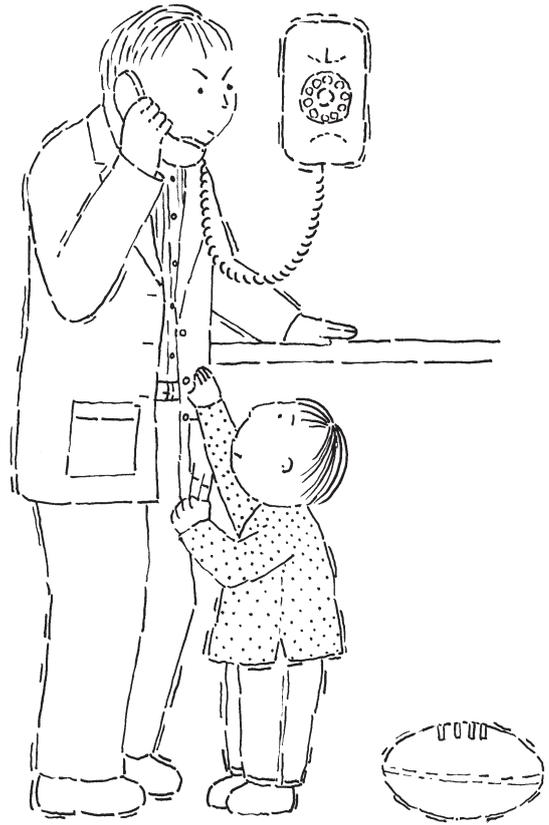
Most preschoolers feel that what they are saying is very important and others should stop and listen. Sometimes children want to speak straight away because they think they may forget what they want to say if they have to wait. Many preschoolers just find it difficult to share their parents' attention with others.

Sometimes parents expect too much and talk to others for longer than preschoolers can be expected to occupy themselves. If children do not get attention when they interrupt politely, they may learn to interrupt loudly and rudely to get attention.

How To Help Prevent Interruptions

Be Reasonable

Most preschoolers can occupy themselves for 10 to 30 minutes. It is reasonable to expect a preschooler not to interrupt during a short telephone conversation. However, it is unreasonable to expect a preschooler not to interrupt if the conversation lasts an hour or if it's the tenth telephone call that morning. Be prepared for times when you will need to respond to your child straight away—like when they are hurt or feel unwell.



Explain the Rules for When You Are Busy

Explain to your child two or three simple rules you would like followed when you are busy. After a while your preschooler will be able to say what the rules are. Ideally, rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Play quietly until Mum or Dad is finished.
- If you need to speak to Mum or Dad, say *Excuse me* and wait until we are free.

Make Sure Your Child Has Something To Do

Children need to learn how to wait. However, to prevent boredom and possible interruptions, children need to be kept busy while they wait. Help your child choose something to do if you are going to be busy for a while. Examples of quiet activities include drawing, picture books, soft toys, puzzles and blocks. As you set your child up in an activity, explain what you will be doing and how long you will be. Briefly remind your child of the rules.

Praise Your Child

Excuse yourself from your conversation from time to time to praise your child for behaving well and following the rules. At first, practise this routine during a few short conversations. Gradually increase the length of the conversations and the amount of time between praising your child. When your child follows the rules without being reminded, praise them.

How To Teach Your Child Appropriate Ways Of Getting Your Attention

Tell Your Child What To Do

If your child interrupts, gain their attention and tell them in a calm, firm voice what you want them to do instead of interrupting—*Caleb don't interrupt when Dad is speaking. Say 'Excuse me Dad' and wait until I am free.* Most children learn quickly to say *Excuse me* but have trouble learning to wait. Pay attention to your child as soon as there is a break in your conversation and remember to praise them for waiting.

Use Quiet Time or Time-Out for Problem Behaviour

If your child does not do as you have asked or continues to interrupt or protest, say something like—*Georgina, you are still interrupting. Go to quiet time.* Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them sit quietly nearby for a short time. Sit your child on a chair away from others. Tell your child that they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, say something like—*You are not being quiet in quiet time, now you must go to time-out.* Time-out involves taking your child away from the situation where a problem has occurred and having them be quiet for a short time. Take your child to an uninteresting but safe room or space. Tell your child they must be quiet for two minutes before they can come out of time-out. Give this reminder even though your child might be upset or angry.

Return Your Child to an Activity

Once your child has been quiet for two minutes in quiet time or time-out, set them up in an activity and remind them of the rules.

Be Consistent

If your child interrupts again, take them straight to quiet time. Do not wait until your child is climbing all over you or screaming before you act. You may need to repeat quiet time or time-out a number of times before your child learns to say *Excuse me* and wait until you are available.

Extra Tips for Telephone Calls

- Choose some quiet toys or activities and store them near the telephone. If they are only used when you are on the telephone, they will remain interesting.
- Rules for the telephone may include:
 - Only answer the telephone if Mum or Dad says you can.
 - Play with your quiet toys while Mum or Dad is on the telephone.
 - Do not interrupt while Mum or Dad is on the telephone.
- Ask your child to say the rules—*What do you have to remember when the telephone rings?* Praise your child for saying the rules.
- To practise the steps, first dial your own telephone number. Speak briefly on the telephone as you normally would. If your child continues to play, praise your child for letting you speak on the telephone—*Max, I'm really pleased that you played quietly while I was on the telephone.* Practise again by arranging for someone to call you at a specific time. Have a brief conversation (about two to three minutes). Praise your child for playing quietly. Over the next few days give your child several further practice runs.
- When your child is with you, try to keep telephone calls brief. If you wish to have a long talk, wait until your child is asleep or being cared for by someone else.

Key Steps

- Be reasonable about the length of time you expect your preschooler to occupy themselves.
- Set some rules for when you are busy.
- Help your child choose something to do.
- Praise your child for playing quietly.
- Teach your child to say *Excuse me* and wait until you are available.
- Act immediately when interrupting occurs.
- Tell your child what to do.
- Use quiet time or time-out to back up your instruction.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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