

Helping Your Kids Use Their Voice

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Do you encourage your kids to stand up for themselves when they feel something isn't right?
Do you also get frustrated when they correct you or point out something you've done wrong?

Do you encourage your kids to think for themselves and make their own choices?
Do you also find yourself getting frustrated that your kids argue with you about rules?

Do you encourage your kids to ask their teachers for clarification when they don't understand something?

Do you also get frustrated when you hear that your kids are questioning or disagreeing with their teachers?



Lisa here. If you identified with any of these conflicting thoughts or feelings, you're not alone. Most parents want their kids to grow up to be independent adults who think for themselves, make their own decisions, and stand up for themselves when they need to. However, those very same parents often undermine their own efforts to foster these skills. You want your kids to use their voice, but it may not always go well when they use that voice with you. 😊 It can be hard to find the balance between teaching your kids to be respectful/cooperative *and* independent/unafraid to speak up.

The good news is that there are many things you can do to help your kids find and use their voice.



Give your kids the chance to make choices: It's important that your kids know how to make up their own minds. An easy way to encourage this is to give your kids opportunities to make decisions. Choices can be about simple things, like what to wear to school or what book they

want to read at bedtime, or about more complicated things, like who they want to be friends with or where they want apply to college. Toddlers are great at having strong opinions, so you can start teaching decision-making skills from a young age. As they make choices, you will certainly have input, especially if they're making unsafe choices (e.g., "It's 30 degrees outside, so shorts are not a great choice today.") But you will also validate their right to make decisions and support them in the choices they make. By the time they're ready for harder choices, they'll feel comfortable with this skill and they will have learned to trust their decision-making skills.

Take your kids seriously- validation is key: When your kids bring up a point or express their feelings, it's critical that you validate them, even when you don't agree with what they're saying. This can be very hard for parents, especially if your kids are expressing thoughts, values, or opinions that are different from yours or from what you've taught them. Remember that validation is not the same as agreement. Validation involves letting your kids know that you hear them and agree with their right to their own opinion. If you don't agree with what they're saying, feel free to give your perspective, but be clear that it's just your perspective- they don't have to change their minds unless they decide to do so. Take what they're saying seriously. If you want them to believe that their voice is important, take them seriously when they use it. Otherwise, they won't use their voice out in the world.



Don't be afraid of questions- even when they're questioning you: This can be another tough one. Kids are great at questioning their parents. They may question the rules, "correct" you about your own behavior, disagree with your beliefs, etc. For parents of younger kids, you're probably sick of the word "why" at this point. Part of the reason why kids ask so many questions is that they're trying to understand the world- they legitimately don't understand why adults tell them certain things or make certain rules. In all honesty, "because I said so" *is* sometimes the answer to the "why" question, but this can't be the only answer you ever give. For instance, if you've decided that it's time for your kids to do their own laundry, giving them the reasoning (e.g., this is a skill they'll need in life) helps them understand why you're all of a sudden adding to their list of chores.

Allow your kids to disagree: Sarah and I work with many parents whose parenting philosophy is that disagreement equals disrespect. When their kids question them or express disagreement with what they say, these parents generally scold their kids in some way or miss an opportunity to validate their kids' right to their own opinion. Interestingly, another thing that we often hear from these parents is bewilderment that their kids never stand up for themselves with other people. If this sounds familiar, think about that for a moment- if your kids learn that they are not allowed to voice their opinion or disagree at home, they're going to struggle to do that out in the world.

Apologize when you're wrong: You're human. Sometimes you're going to make mistakes. That's okay. It's also okay to apologize to your kids when you're wrong about something. Many parents feel that if they start apologizing to their kids, then their kids will not take them seriously. Here's the thing- when you're wrong, your kids already know it. I'm sure they see/hear you apologizing to *other* people when you make a mistake. So, if you don't apologize to them, you're inadvertently sending them the message that they're not worth an apology.



Help them practice problem-solving and standing up for themselves: A lot of kids (and adults) struggle with problem-solving and with appropriately standing up for themselves. You can help your kids with this at home. Using the skills I described above goes a long way toward helping them feel like they have a voice *and* the right to use it. You can also help your kids learn how to effectively problem solve. When things happen at home (e.g., between siblings, between you and your kids, etc.) you and your kids can discuss the best way to resolve the issue. Talking about compromise, practicing hearing each other out when differences arise, and discussing the best outcome for everyone involved are great strategies to use. You can also help them problem-solve issues that come up for them with friends, teachers, co-workers, etc.

Teach them the difference between speaking their mind and being disrespectful:

Disrespectful behavior is a real concern and many kids have a hard time knowing the difference between being assertive and being disrespectful. Modeling the difference and role-playing acceptable behavior can help them learn this. Let your kids know that it's not *what* they're saying that's problematic, it's *how* they're saying it. If you validate their thoughts and feelings first, addressing inappropriate behavior is much easier because they are less likely to feel attacked or dismissed and more likely to listen to your feedback.

As always- you're their role model: As Sarah and I have talked about many times, your kids are always watching you and modeling what they see you doing. So, if you fly off the handle and yell at your co-worker for making a mistake, your kids are going to think that's the way to stand

up for themselves. But if they see you calmly but firmly stating your opinion, enforcing your boundaries, and making your own choices, they'll model that behavior.

As you've read this post, you've hopefully recognized many things that you already do. Just remember that you're helping your kids build a strong foundation for their self-esteem and self-confidence. Keep valuing their voice and showing them how to use it and they'll be well on their way to becoming the independent, self-assured adults you want them to be.

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Confidence isn't walking
into a room thinking
you're better than
everyone, it's walking in
not having to compare
yourself to anyone at all.

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