

## Interrupting

All children need lots of attention from their parents. However, all parents occasionally need their own time, such as when they are on the telephone, talking to another adult or doing something that requires concentration. At these times it is reasonable to expect preschoolers to occupy themselves and not 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 and to get your attention in an acceptable way.

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 is 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.

### WHAT IS INTERRUPTING?

Interrupting involves breaking into another person's conversation or activity and preventing them from continuing. It is common for preschoolers to do this. Children often approach adults for information, help or to share what they are doing. These are important learning opportunities. Interrupting only becomes a problem at times when parents are busy and cannot be disturbed or 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 hard to share their parents' attention with others. Sometimes parents expect too much and talk to others for longer than preschoolers can be expected to keep themselves occupied. 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

#### ▼ Prepare Your Child Ahead of Time

Explain to your child that there are times when you are busy doing something

important and you cannot be interrupted. Any time you are going to be busy, explain what you will be doing and how long you will be. Answer any questions about what you will be doing.

#### ▼ Explain the Rules

Decide on two or three simple rules for when you are busy and discuss them with your child. 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.

Before you become involved in your own activity, ask your child to tell you the rules — *So, what rules do you have to remember while I am busy talking to the bank manager?* Praise them if they tell you. If your child does not say the rules, calmly remind them.



If there were problems last time you were busy doing something, briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *Last time I was busy talking to a visitor, you forgot our rule about saying 'Excuse me' and waiting.* Tell your child what you would like them to do differently this time — *Today, let's see if you can remember to say 'Excuse me' and wait until I am free.*

#### ▼ Talk About Rewards

At first you may like to reward your child. Tell your child what they can earn if they follow the rules while you are busy. Suggested rewards include a special activity with you when you are free.

#### ▼ Talk About Consequences

Decide ahead of time exactly how to deal with problem behaviour. Tell your child what will happen if the rules are broken. Explain how you will use quiet time or time-out (see over).

#### ▼ Plan Some Activities

It may also be useful for you to think of some suitable things for your child to do while you are busy. Examples of quiet activities include drawing, picture books, soft toys, puzzles and blocks.

### HOW TO MANAGE YOUR CHILD WHEN YOU ARE BUSY

#### ▼ Set Your Child Up in an Activity

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. If necessary, spend a few minutes helping them to choose and get started on an activity.

#### ▼ Encourage Desirable Behaviour

Stop what you are doing from time to time to praise your child for behaving well and following the rules — *Adrian,*

thank you for playing so quietly while I'm on the phone. Help them get started on a new activity if they are starting to lose interest in what they are doing. Do this before problems occur.

### ▼ If Misbehaviour Occurs, Tell Your Child What To Do

If your child breaks a rule, act straight away. Tell your child what to stop doing — *Caleb, stop interrupting when I am speaking* — and what to do instead — *Say 'Excuse me Dad' and wait until I am free*. Most children quickly learn to say *Excuse me* but have trouble waiting. If your child does as you ask, when there is a break in your activity or conversation, praise them for waiting and give them your attention.

### ▼ Back Up Your Instruction With Quiet Time or Time-Out

If your child does not do as you have asked or breaks the rule again, use quiet time. Tell your child what they have done wrong and the consequence — *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 they must be quiet for 2 minutes before they can come out of quiet time.

If your child does not sit quietly, use time-out. 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 2 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

When your child has been quiet for 2 minutes in quiet time or time-out, set them up in an activity. Praise your child as soon as they behave well again. If misbehaviour occurs, repeat quiet time or time-out (the same consequence as the last 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 stops misbehaving.

### ▼ Review How Things Went

When you have finished what you were doing, tell your child what you liked about their behaviour while you were busy — *Josh, today you were very good at saying 'Excuse me' and waiting when you wanted to talk to me*. If your child followed the rules, praise them and give them the reward you agreed on earlier. If problems occurred, do not give the reward. Briefly and calmly describe one rule your child forgot to follow — *You forgot our rule about playing quietly when I am busy*. Set a goal for the next visit — *Next time I am busy, let's see if you can remember to play quietly*. Spend some quality time with your child.

### 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 to your child.
- 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

**FOR FURTHER HELP** See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

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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 2 to 3 minutes). Praise your child for playing quietly. Over the next few days give your child several more 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.
- If your child does not follow the rules, excuse yourself from your conversation. Deal with problem behaviour as suggested earlier. Return to your telephone call.

### KEY STEPS

- Be reasonable about the length of time you expect your preschooler to occupy themselves.
- Remind your child of the rules for when you are busy.
- Talk about rewards and consequences.
- Help your child choose something to do.
- Praise and reward your child for following the rules.
- Act immediately if misbehaviour occurs.
- Tell your child what to do.
- Back up your instruction with quiet time or time-out.
- Return your child to an activity.
- Review with your child how things went.

As your child learns to occupy themselves and to get your attention in an acceptable way, you will not need to remind them of the rules, rewards and consequences each time you are busy doing something. Even though you will discuss the rules less often, they will still apply. Use consequences consistently if the rules are broken. Gradually make rewards less predictable by giving them every now and then. Continue to praise your child for keeping themselves occupied when you are busy, and getting your attention in an acceptable way.