

A Clinical Treatment Guide to 10 Common Pediatric Behavioral Problems

Interrupting Others During Conversations



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(phone or face to face)

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *A Clinical Treatment Guide to 10 Common Behavioral Pediatric Problems* by Ennio Cipani

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1. *Provide a signal or instruction to your child.*

In order for your child to begin to learn when it is not appropriate to interrupt, a signal and/or instruction indicating that interruptions are not permissible is needed at the beginning of the conversation. A brief verbal explanation, such as, "I will be on the phone with Uncle Henry for the next 4 minutes. Please do not interrupt me until I am finished unless it is an emergency," should suffice.

2. *Delineate the length of time your conversation will entail.*

Letting your child know how long you will be tied up is important. I recommend an oven timer to clearly delineate the length of time your child must go without interruption. Upon initiating the conversation, set the oven timer for the designated length of time and show it to your child. The oven timer is kept in plain view so that your child can see the time left when desired. Once the oven timer goes off, terminate the conversation shortly, or allow your child an opportunity to interrupt briefly and/or participate.

3. *Please use an oven timer for this behavioral strategy.*

The reason for the great reliance on the oven timer is that many children cannot **wait** with unpredictable amounts of time. Subsequently, they interrupt your conversation as a mechanism to get you to end the conversation and engage them. An oven timer makes the "wait" requirement specific. In this manner the length of time your child does not interrupt can be programmed progressively for longer and longer periods of time. It also allows for an error correction procedure (delineated in step 6 below) which is highly effective in teaching your child self-control in this area.

4. *Develop a signal that indicates when your child can be allowed to enter into conversation.*

Once your child is capable of waiting a sufficient period of time during your conversations, you can develop their ability to enter into a conversation when it is appropriate. This social grace is fairly difficult to acquire, since the cues are subtle. Therefore, prior to acquiring this subtle distinction, children need a signal which indicates that entering the conversation appropriately is acceptable at this point in time. The signal can be verbal. For example, "O.K. Johnny you have waited patiently to talk, would you like to

say something?"

5. *Teach your child that the consequence of interrupting is a delay in getting your attention.*

This can only be done with an **oven timer** (i.e., reliably and systematically). When your child engages in an interruption, you point that out to him/her immediately and concisely, e.g., "You interrupted." No need for a detailed explanation here. Within a split second of that verbal feedback, you then add extra time (determined a priori) to the oven timer and say, "Now you will have to wait longer." Your child learns that interrupting you while on the phone now results in a delay to your attention.

6. *Tolerance training to develop your child's self-control to "wait".*

To accomplish this, I have used "fake" phone calls. The parent receives multiple phone calls during a training session, with the child being informed of this in advance. The child is told to try to refrain from interrupting until the oven timer sounds and the parent has hung up the phone. The phone call is limited to a short period of time (e.g., **2 minutes**). The use of an oven timer during this training is paramount. Once your child successfully handles 2 minute conversations, without interrupting, the parent can progressively raise the bar (i.e., the standard) to three minutes. You should continue these training sessions for some period of time. Rome was not built in a day!

7. *Try not to change the standard too quickly.*

Don't go from 2 minutes to 20 minutes in one day, especially with young children. That speedy progression is almost invariably doomed to defeat. Be happy with small successes. You can eventually get to 10 minutes but it might take a few weeks of training sessions. Consider that you may have waited for three years for your child to learn to refrain from interrupting. Given this fact, waiting another three to six weeks is not so bad.