

COMMENTARY

At-home dad learns kids are always listening

As I've spent more time with my kids, I've also spent more time with other people's kids. I see them at school, at sports, at the store — so many environments in which I have at one time or another heard the parent say, "Kids, they just don't listen."

Wrong! Kids may not respond they way you want, or at all. But they're always listening.

It's pretty apparent that a television blaring over the radio will consume any possible attention not being directed to the toy of the moment. You tell them something during this sensory overload, but they obviously don't "hear" you. That explains the angry "Hey, I was watching/listening to/playing with that!" you get as you eliminate each item hindering their ability to "hear" the commands

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you have been barking at them for the last five minutes.

"Well," I respond, "maybe next time, you'll listen."

Even in virtual silence, how often do you find yourself telling your kids something more than once? "Put that down ... PUT that down ... PUT THAT DOWN" is a painfully familiar chorus for me to sing as I pay for groceries and the girls feverishly forage through the candy

cornucopia positioned perfectly to accommodate the eyes and hands of young shoppers. How could they possibly "hear" my voice while being overwhelmed by the allure of sugar-induced euphoria?

Then there are the times when I'm fairly certain my elevated voice is finding its way into my children's little ears.

"Don't rock the stool like that," I instruct Daughter No. 2. "You're going to fall and hurt yourself!"

I know she "heard" me. Yet she continues rocking. Then I hear a crash, followed quickly by, "Waaaaaaaaaa, oweeee-oweeee-oweeee!" Running to comfort the injured kitchen gymnast, I can't help but suggest, "See, you should have listened."

But there's another side to

the listening/hearing paradox — the stuff they hear when we think they're not around.

Now, Mommy's no potty mouth. Life's frustrations rarely drive her to profanity, beyond the occasional, "Awww crap!" This rare occurrence is, of course, followed by the frantic confirmation that the girls are out of earshot ... or so she thinks.

Imagine the shock when Daughter No. 1, taking a fairly full box of toys looked to Daughter No. 2 and whispered, "Holy crap, this is heavy."

We were horrified. OK, it's not the worst thing she could utter. But it's also not an item I expect to see on her spelling list from school. Bad Daughter No. 1? Uh, no. Bad Mommy!

You see, I believe kids have super-hearing — kind of like

dogs. My dog would be awakened from an almost comatose sleep by the sound of a potato chip striking a carpeted floor at the other end of the house. Yet shouting at him, from four feet away, to stop eating rabbit poop in the yard, had about a 50 percent response rate.

It's the same with the kids ... except for the poop ... usually.

The kids and the dogs are listening. They are excellent multitaskers, able to absorb every word muttered in their general vicinity, despite their rapidly changing focus on other things.

What you're saying might not be of interest or importance, at least not at that moment. They hear you, though, and they're saving each little tidbit for just the right moment. Just the right moment, that is, for them.

Daughter No. 1 asks, "Daddy,

can I go ride my bike?" Trying to illustrate the difference between "can I" and "may I," I respond, "I don't know, can you?" It seemed like a good concept until that weekend when I asked, "Can I help you with your homework?" and she responded, "I don't know. Can you?"

Blame the school if you want, or the day care, or the kids down the block. Just don't think that as parents, we're without some of that blame.

Remember, kids learn to talk by listening to what we say to them. How often, I wonder, do they learn to "talk back" because of what we say when we think they're not listening?

Confusing wisdom for the at-home dad.

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