

CONVERSATIONS WITH OUR KIDS are not always easy. Sometimes it feels as if they just are not listening. Other times it seems that, with all our efforts, we cannot get our children to share their thoughts, concerns, or even their desires. Or perhaps they are sharing, but not in a way that is appropriate, timely, or helpful.

And to complicate matters, one of the greatest challenges parents of children with ADHD face is that they have a difficult time helping their children manage their frustration and anger. This is because inherent in the diagnosis of ADHD is usually a difficulty in managing self-regulation skills. Those are the skills that give us the ability to pause, reflect, and communicate our concerns and desires effectively.

Complicating the struggles that parents have with their children is that the parents themselves often struggle to communicate effectively *in the moment* without adding their own anger or frustration into the conversation. After all, it's not easy trying to manage our own emotions in the midst of an emotional storm.

So, what can we do to help kids communicate more effectively? How can we get them to open up to us to share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas? One important step is to actively teach kids the art of a productive conversation. In doing so, we can improve their ability to speak in ways so they can be understood, and listen in ways that can help them understand both how they are being perceived and how they can work with others to reach agreement on matters that concern them. Second, we can model for them these important communication steps so that they also gain trust that we really are willing to try to understand their thoughts, concerns, and ideas.

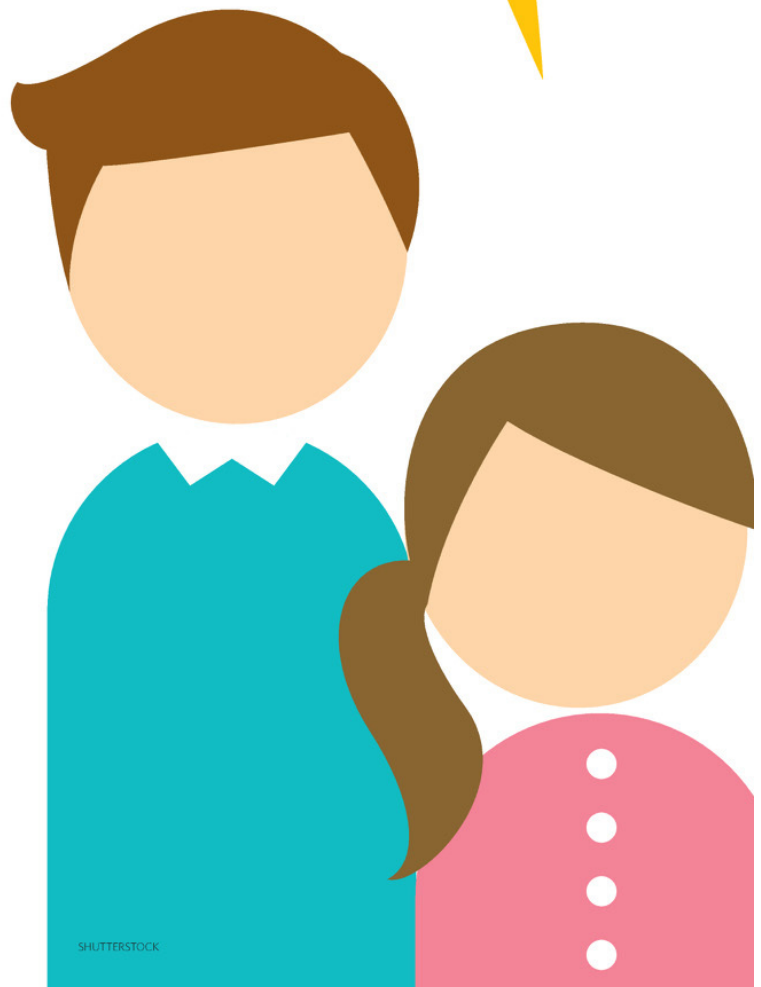
I recommend that you plan a time to have a family discussion where you can actively teach the rules of a helpful conversation. Let your children know that the conversation will only take fifteen minutes—and keep to your word so you can build their trust. If necessary, you may offer an exchange for the time you wish to spend, such as letting them stay up fifteen minutes past bedtime, no chores for the day, or having the discussion over their favorite dessert.

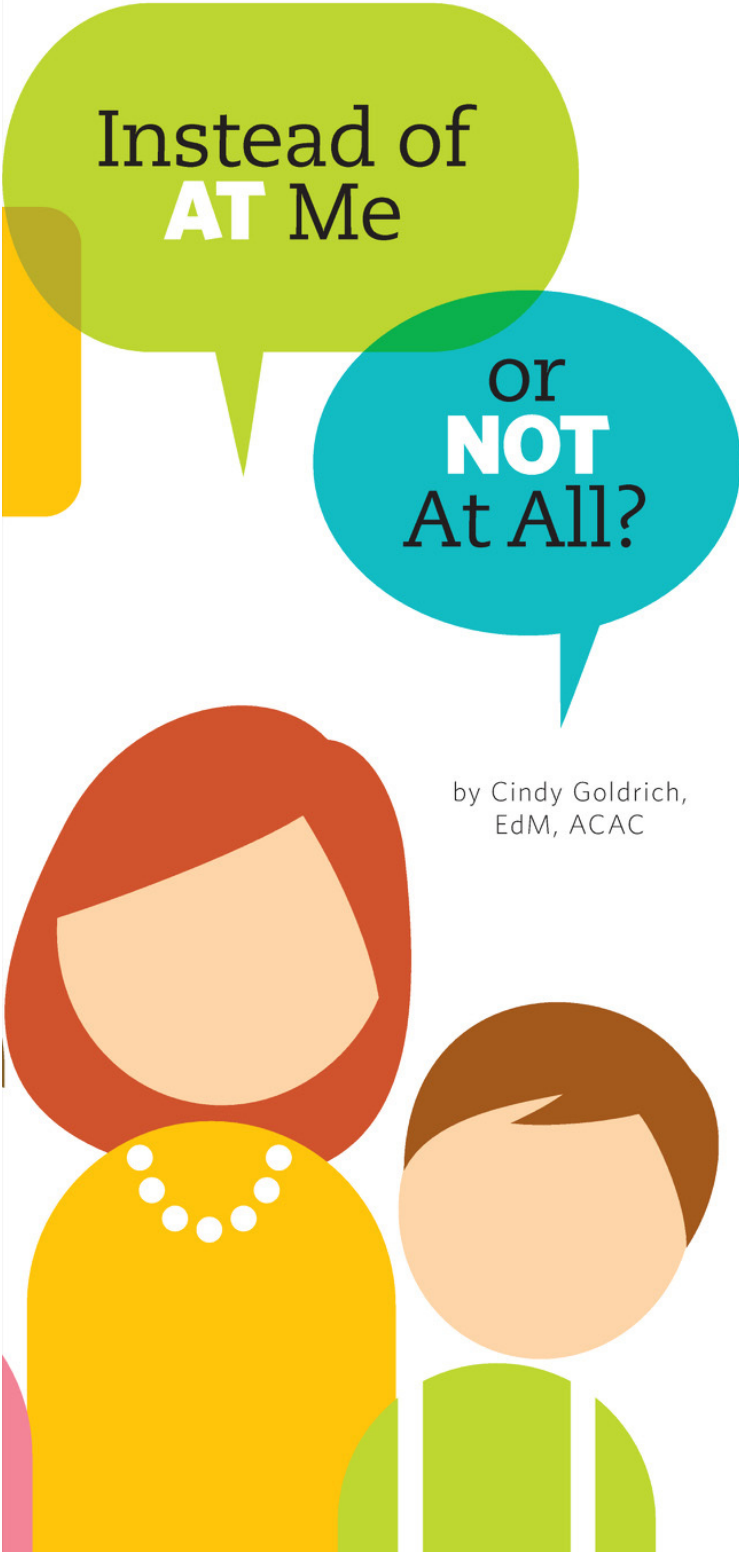
During this conversation, you will teach them the role of being the speaker and the listener.

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How Do I
Get My Kid

to Talk
TO Me





Instead of
AT Me

or
NOT
At All?

by Cindy Goldrich,
EdM, ACAC

Role of the listener

Their job of the listener is to do three things:

- **Mirror** what you hear the speaker say. Try as accurately as possible to restate, in your own words, what you believe the speaker said. Don't add any opinions, facts, or thoughts. Simply "reflect" what you heard. *"So, you are saying that you threw the ball when Jonny said you were cheating."*
- **Validate** what the speaker said by letting them know that you understand what they said, that it makes sense to you. *"You seem very upset that Jonny accused you of cheating. Have I got that right?"*
- **Empathize** with the speaker. Communicate that you connect with or really understand the emotions of the other person. *"And I can imagine that you might feel..."* Or *"I understand that you feel... That must be really frustrating."*

When listening, be careful of your nonverbal language as well (no eye rolling, wincing, etc.). Also, be careful not to interrupt the speaker. If necessary, use a timer so each person will have the same amount of time to speak.

Role of the speaker

As the speaker tells their story, you want to encourage them to pause to give time for the listener to reflect and absorb what is being said. You want to encourage the speaker to notice if they feel understood before they continue speaking. If they do not, they can ask the listener to let them know what it is that they think the speaker is trying to say. This is how trust is built.

When someone does not feel understood, they are less likely to allow themselves to risk speaking further, especially if it is an emotional or important issue. Or, they may continuously repeat the same concerns or ideas, not believing that the listener really understands. Or worse, they may disengage from the conversation, losing confidence that their voice matters.

Do you remember playing the game "Telephone" when you were young? This is a great game to play to practice good listening and reflecting skills. You can also ask each family member to do a short interview with one another in order to learn something new, and then share what they learn with the family. For example, they can ask each other, *"What is your favorite hobby and why?"*

Have fun with it! Remember, we cannot solve problems if we don't truly understand what one another's position really is. 🗣️