

FACT SHEET

NOT Listening... or Still Processing?



Why children may seem to ignore adults

Many adults interpret a lack of response as defiance or inattention. Research into child attention and brain development shows a different story: children often need more time and the right conditions to process spoken language.

Technology and impatience

Modern technology trains our brains to expect instant responses. Notifications, fast videos, and constant phone use reduce our tolerance for waiting. Children's brains do not work at this speed.

When we expect immediate action, we often repeat or escalate too quickly, interrupting the child's processing. Slowing ourselves down is a powerful act of support.

1. The brain is still switching modes

Children do not shift between activities the way adults do. When they are deeply engaged in play, movement, or thought, the brain stays in that state for a while.

What's happening in the brain:

- The child is still inside the previous task.
- Spoken words may be heard but not yet understood.
- This is not refusal, it is delayed transition.

What adults often do: repeat, correct, or raise their voice.

What helps: pause and allow the brain to exit the last activity.

2. Processing takes 5-10 seconds

Studies show many children need **5-10 seconds** to understand a spoken request and prepare a response. Most adults wait **less than 2 seconds**.

The challenge: When adults speak again too quickly, the second command interrupts the first. The brain cannot complete the process.

What this looks like:

- Child freezes
- Child looks distracted or slow
- Child appears "in their own world"

What is really happening: interrupted processing.

Key principle:

Fewer words create more space.

Reflection check for adults

Did I say their name?

Before repeating or raising your voice, ask yourself:
Did I move into their space?

Did I wait long enough?

Did I give only one clear instruction?

3. Listening is more than hearing

Listening requires filtering sound, movement, emotions, and background noise.

Common blockers:

- TV or music
- Busy rooms
- Other children moving
- Emotional overload

What helps:

- Say the child's name first
- Move into their visual field
- Wait for eye contact or body turn

The brain locks onto the message when there is a visual anchor.

4. Too many words shut the brain down

Adults often fill silence with:

- Repeating
- Explaining
- Counting
- Threatening consequences

This increases mental load and reduces clarity.

The goal is not better speech – it is better timing.

5. One small habit that changes everything

Families and educators who change one habit see rapid improvement.

The new pattern:

1. Move closer
2. Say the child's name
3. Pause 5–10 seconds
4. Give **one short request**

What happens next:

- Eyes turn
- Body follows
- Action begins

Listening improves when the brain is allowed to arrive instead of being chased.

Try this simple routine each day:

- Move close to your child before speaking.
- Say their name and wait for them to look at you.
- Pause quietly for 5–10 seconds.
- Give one short instruction only.

Example: Instead of: "How many times do I have to tell you to put your shoes on, we are late!"

Try: "Sam." (pause) "Shoes on." (wait)

Helpful tips:

- Turn off background noise before giving instructions.
- Keep your voice calm and slow.
- Allow your child thinking time before repeating.
- Praise effort when they respond.

What if waiting changed everything?

Sometimes behaviour does not need correcting, it needs time.

A few quiet seconds can turn "not listening" into cooperation.