

Stop. Look. Listen. Say.

- **BEHAVIOUR**

by Michael Grose

Recently, I saw a remarkable act of parenting delivered in difficult circumstances. A mother calmly won cooperation from her very excited four-year-old daughter just minutes after an unexpected visit from a neighbour and her children.

It was time for bed but Miss Four-Year-Old looked too wound up to go. Her mother calmly said, “Harper....stop!” There was a long pause between the two words, giving Harper time to take notice.

“Look at me, please.” Harper made eye contact. “Now listen.”

“I want you to go into your room. Put on your pyjamas. Then choose a book.” Three instructions only.

“Harper, what did I just say?”

“I’ve got to go to my room. Get my pyjamas and a book.”

“Great! Off you go!”

This mum used the stop, look, listen, say method to get her daughter to cooperate. Her use of clear, simple language was admirable but it was only part of the success formula of this technique. Body language, tone of voice and eye contact all played a part.

This mother oozed credibility, so it was little wonder her daughter complied. In fact, this mother managed like a cat, which is a metaphor for managing with credibility.

If you struggle to get your kids to do as you wish, it’s probably your body language and tone of voice that give you away. That is, it’s less what you say and more about how you say it that makes a big difference. When speaking in a credible or cat-like (a metaphor for credibility) way the following factors come into play:

Steady voice

A cat-like parent will speak with a flat, clipped but friendly voice. This mother used a strong firm voice when she spoke. She took a slight pause between each sentence, which allowed the messages to sink in.

Still head

Your head stays still when you talk. A still head indicates calmness, confidence and authority. This mother also smiled as she spoke, which kept the mood friendly.

Strong body

Your body follows in line with your head. A still, steady posture rather than a body that’s bobbing around, leaning forward or slouching sends the message that you expect cooperation.

Palms down

Your palms will most likely face downwards as this indicates calm and authority. When your hands face the ground it's far harder to speak with cadence in your voice, which is essential for friendly conversations rather than gaining cooperation.

Look away

In this example, the mother was able to initiate eye contact by saying to her daughter, "Look at me." She made sure her daughter got her message. But she also took her eye contact away once she knew her message had been heard, rather than stay and be drawn into an argument. Cats will withdraw eye contact, even move away rather than stay and debate a point.

This mother's cat-like management technique was no accident. She'd practised this method often in low stress situations so that it's easy to use in difficult circumstances, even when she is tired.

Sports people know they revert to their lowest level of skill when they are fatigued, so they continually practise their skills so they become automatic. That's as true in parenting and relationships as it is on the sports field. By practising new skills in low stress situations you can maintain your effectiveness and your relationship with your children when you're tired or in unforeseen circumstances.