Interrupting

Interrupting comes naturally to children because they tend to forget that other people have needs that are as important (or almost, at least) as theirs. Even if your child knows that he/she is supposed to wait for a pause in the conversation and say, "Excuse me," the protocol slips their mind because what they have to say feels so urgent at that moment.

Your child may be especially prone to interrupting if yours is a talkative family or if they often hear you and/or your spouse or other adult relative finishing each other's sentences. You've probably already talked with your child about when they should interrupt (the house is on fire) and when they shouldn't (he/she is bored). Your child probably also knows (even if they don't always remember) that the appropriate way to preface a necessary interruption is to quietly say, "Excuse me." But putting these principles into practice is much harder than merely comprehending them, especially for high-energy kids.

How should I teach my child not to interrupt?

Teach your child how to determine if something warrants an interruption. Children often are so focused on their own needs that they don't really absorb the fact that they're being rude. Teach your child to wait for a pause in the conversation and to say, "Excuse me." When your child does this, respond positively. If the interruption is of a nature that it can and should wait, politely inform your child of this and then continue talking.

Tell your child that if they want something when you are talking to another adult, they should walk up to you and gently squeeze your arm. You will then squeeze their hand to indicate that you know they are there and will be with them in a minute. At first, respond rather quickly so your child can see the success of this method. Over time you can wait longer, just give a gentle squeeze every few minutes to remind your child that you remember the request.

Set limits courteously and consistently; pause, look your child in the eye, and say something like, "I'm busy rolling out cookie dough right now, but I'll help you set up the dominoes when I'm finished." It's a good idea to clearly state how long you expect to be: "I need 10 more minutes on the computer to finish this letter, and then we can work on your math problem." Such explanations keep your child from thinking it'll be "a million years" before you get around to helping them. It may also be helpful to give your child something else to do in the meantime: "why don't you finish watching your show" or "why don't you start building your Lego". Children also generally find it easier to wait if they understand why. You might briefly explain, "I need to get dinner into the oven, so that we can eat and not be late for your concert. As soon as I'm done, we can braid your hair."

Once you have explained your reasons, turn your face, body and attention away from your child. Do not engage your child with repeated pleas for them to stop. If your child continues to interrupt, don't give them attention: Attention has a powerful effect on children's behaviour, especially for younger children. Many attention-seeking behaviours, such as tantrums, complaining/whinging, pouting and interrupting can be managed effectively by withholding attention. By not paying attention to these behaviours, parents encourage their children to develop more appropriate methods of getting attention. On the other hand, giving attention to children when they are engaged in appropriate activities makes it more likely that the child will do these more often.

Withholding attention while a child is misbehaving can be a very difficult thing to do. For it to work you must ignore the child completely. That is:

- Don't watch what the child is doing: turn your back and walk away if necessary.
- Don't talk: don't even tell the child to stop.
- Don't give any physical contact.

Praise your child for using good manners, remembering to say "excuse me," and waiting patiently. "Thank you for waiting so nicely!"