

STEPS & STAGES



big talker

How to manage the airtime when you have an overly chatty child.

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD NOLAN WOULD REGULARLY COME home with notes from school about his incessant chatter. He loved socializing so much that he'd rush through his classwork to gab with his pals, eventually leading his teacher to seat him next to her and give him extra projects to prevent the disruptions. "The talking starts from the moment he gets up in the morning, and it never stops," says Nolan's mom, Shannon Searle.

Fellow Calgarian Renae Espey can relate. Her eight-year-old daughter, Kaitlyn, is so talkative in class that her teacher developed a hand signal to indicate when she needs to cut out the chit-chat. "When the teacher told me she has a 'system' with Kaitlyn," says the mother of two, "I said, 'Oh, my God, she's gotten to the point where she needs a system.'"

Children with lots to say often have great qualities—both Espey and Searle describe their kids as friendly, bright and outgoing—but they may have a hard time listening or being quiet, and are prone to interrupting others. This can be a problem, especially when a verbose child has a less talkative sibling, a situation with which Espey is familiar. Her six-year-old son, Sean, is more introverted and often has trouble getting a word in edgewise with his older sister stealing the spotlight. Espey's solution is to have her children take turns telling their stories. "The tricky part with Kaitlyn is that she tends to ramble, so sometimes I need to set time limits so Sean gets a turn," she says.

Gabby kids can drive Mom and Dad up the wall, too. However, experts say beleaguered parents should avoid the temptation of tuning out the constant stream of babble, and instead use more constructive ways of coping with a loquacious little one. Jeanne Williams, an Edmonton psychologist and parenting expert, recommends setting aside some one-on-one time with your child each day where you focus on listening to him. "Get down on his level, look him in the eyes, and no matter how mundane what he's talking about seems, show interest," advises Williams. If your child can count on you to listen to the not-so-important things, she explains, he'll be more likely to share what really matters during the teen years. Williams adds parents should steer clear of negatively labelling a talkative kid—even calling him a "chatterbox" is pejorative and can impact his self-esteem.



To help this type of kid manage at school, Sharyn Timerman, a Montreal behaviour specialist, suggests giving him a stress ball he can squeeze whenever he feels the urge to talk. She emphasizes that this is meant to be a temporary measure while the child learns self-control. Parents should discuss a strategy like this with the teacher beforehand and also get their child on board by asking what he thinks would help when he feels tempted to disrupt his classmates.

On the home front, it's important not to get angry. Marcie Sharp says her son Jake, seven, has been yakking continuously since he started talking at age two. "Sometimes I feel like I'm about to go crazy," says the Shetland, Ont., mother of two. "I want him to feel that what he has to say is important, but it's not crucial to explain the backstory of every single Avengers character."

Searle copes by giving herself a "mommy time out" every day—10 to 15 minutes where she escapes the noise and does something for herself, whether it's taking a bath or having a quick phone chat with her friend, while her kids either play, read or watch TV. Sharp employs another strategy. She puts on some tunes, declaring a "music break," to get a respite from all the jabbering—Jake will immediately stop talking and either listen to the music or dance.

Although there are trying moments, Sharp acknowledges the countless benefits of having a child with the gift of the gab. "He's never going to have any issues communicating," she says. "I get a lot of comments that he's a very pleasant, sociable little guy." —STACEY STEIN

EXPERT TIP

Cope with a chatty child by playing the "quiet game"—the first person to break the silence loses. "Make sure you lose a little more than half the time," says Jeanne Williams, an Edmonton parenting expert. "The point is to develop a skill in your child."

