

How to respond to non-responding.

Avoiding avoidance.

- 1 Use an appropriate level of language from the start.
- 2 Avoid “scrolling” when your child fails to respond.
- 3 Rewarding non-responding always increases future occurrences.
- 4 Think about whether your child is able to imagine what you are talking about only by hearing your words.
- 5 Limit how many sentences you say.
- 6 Phrase questions directly.
- 7 Make words the essential part any solution.
- 8 Directly prompt your child to give you verbal replies.
- 9 Don’t offer your child “yes or no” choices.
- 10 Offer choices in positive pairs.
- 11 Use tone and gesture to enhance your meaning.
- 12 Teach your child that not responding is always more work for your child than responding.

First, an example of what should never happen.

You are with your child in the school lunchroom.

“You seem so thirsty. I’ll bet you’d like something to drink. Would you like something?”

To understand what the word “something” refers to, your listener will have to process your first two sentences. It’s an indirect question, and your child fails to respond.

“Say, do you want something to drink?”

Notice that your language got easier. The question is shorter and more direct, but your child still does not respond.

“How about milk or some juice? Milk or juice?”

This language is even easier. It asks direct questions, and then offers positive multiple choice answers. However, your child still does not respond and turns away, playing with the buttons on his shirt. You kneel down to speak to him at eye level.

“Come on! I see you sweating. You must want something to drink. How about a glass of chocolate milk?”

This is a lot of speech. It ends with a clear direct question with a single potential answer modeled, but still no verbal response. In

addition, you’re now thinking of something your child is even more likely to enjoy than milk, chocolate milk! The deal just got sweeter, literally, and your child smiles without saying a word. You pick up a chocolate milk and hold it up.

“Is this what you want? Do you want chocolate milk?”

Your child whines and silently reaches for the chocolate milk,

“Okay, wait one second while I get a glass.”

He/she waits until the glass is filled and happily drinks it.

Structure your choices and questions in ways that require verbal responses.

1 Use an appropriate level of language from the start.

Alicia is very young and has limited language usage. It’s important that I choose the correct level of language when I begin speaking to her so that she always comprehends what I’m saying. Beginning at too complex a level, being ignored and then resorting to easier language will always be viewed by her as a reward and will encourage her to continue avoiding verbal responses.”

2 Avoid “scrolling” when your child fails to respond.

“Scrolling” involves offering your child a choice or asking a question and then, if there is no response, offering other choices or other questions, often one at a time.

As you scroll through your options, hoping to elicit a response, you’ll begin to inadvertently make your options easier and easier and your language simpler. The longer your child fails to respond, and the easier your offerings become, the more he/she will be encouraged to wait you out for less constructive options.

3 Rewarding non-responding always increases future occurrences.

Though scrolling may solve life’s little problems in the short term, you are actually rewarding your child for not responding and encouraging this practice to grow, especially when it involves activities your child may prefer to avoid.

4 Think about whether your child is able to imagine what you are talking about only by hearing your words.

If I feel even simple words will not convey your thoughts, take out the actual objects you’re talking about and point to them before starting. Speak in short direct sentences.

5 Limit how many sentences you say.

Just one is best. Use two at the most, while watching carefully that your child is making eye contact with you, listening and attempting to comprehend what you’re saying.

6 Phrase questions directly. ER to expand.

7 Make words the essential part any solution.

If your child whines, tries to grab the something, or otherwise shows he/she wants it but refuses to verbalize or answer questions, put the object out of reach so he/she will learn that words, not whining or reaching, are the only way to solve problems.

"Alicia, it looks like you might really want that Lego." I'll point to it, sounding hopeful and encouraging. "Or do you want the cup or something else?" If she says, "Something else!" I'll say, "Okay, maybe you want the apple or something else!" as I again wait for her verbal response.

When she makes an effort at answering by repeating my words, I'll quickly hand it to her while saying, "Yes, apple! I asked "Do you want apple?" and Alicia told me "Yes, apple!"

Repeating words a few extra times in a sing-song playful way is also effective with her. "Yes, yes, apple, apple. Alicia has the apple!" Finally, I'll reward her response with, "Thanks for telling me what you wanted!"

8 Directly prompt your child to repair any missed communication with verbal replies.

"Alicia, I said something. You can ask me, "Whaddya say?" I could have also asked "What did you say?" But I find if I say it more like casual speech, she's more likely to understand that it is a phrase she can use to repair a disconnected conversation vs. something I was asking her.

If all else fails, I may block what Alicia's doing, come close, smile and say, "Hey, I said something." Then wait for her to respond.

If she begins to do something else, I'll say, "Yes, but first, I said something to you". Then I'll wait until she asks, "What did you say?"

9 Don't offer your child "yes or no" choices.

For your child, answering with a "no" is easy, it's fast to say, and it feels like a safe default. So when you give a "yes or no" choice, you'll often find the child rapidly choosing "No!

Instead, offer two positive choices. Then say, "Would either of those ideas work for you?" If your child comes up with his/her own "No!", ask for an explanation. "No because ?" This will offer insights into the child's reasoning that an automatic "no" will not.

10 Offer choices in positive pairs.

If you give choices one at a time, your child will always feel his/her answer can be a "no." Then you may inadvertently begin "scrolling" through lists of new options.

Sohan is older than Alicia and his language is more advanced. Today when the teacher asked Sohan, "Would you like to go and walk under the trees?", he said "no".

Then I asked him, "Sohan, it's time to see some trees, but do you want to go to the little forest or the big one over there?" He answered and we followed his direction. Then I asked, "Do you want to go out this gate or that gate?" In both cases he made a

choice and then started moving forward toward our goal of walking in nature.

In some instances there may be a great number of things for your child to choose from. Offering them all two at a time may be unworkable or frustrating for your child. In this situation, make an exception to the "Don't offer yes or no choices" rule.

Alicia was reaching for something on a crowded counter top. I asked her what she wanted. Instead of pointing to two of the 20 objects there and saying, "Do you want the doll or the ball? Do you want the cup or the bottle?", "Do you want the...?", I decided to offer her paired choices, but in the form of "yes or no" questions. "I think you might want the banana." I pointed to the banana as I named it, but wouldn't hand it to her until I received a verbal response. "Yes banana or no banana?", I asked. She answered, "No banana."

11 Use tone and gesture to enhance your meaning.

"Oh, maybe you want this Lego piece. Yes Lego?" I held it up but did not give it to her. "Or No lego?" I gestured, shook my head no, sounded like "Ooh yuck, who would want that no Lego piece?" in order to enhance the meaning of the phrase "No lego".

12 Teach your child that not responding is always more work for your child than responding.

Children often refuse to respond verbally because it's more difficult while avoidance can be easier and less threatening.

If Alicia has refused to respond to me verbally, before repeating myself I say in a friendly tone, "Hey, try again. I said...." and then I repeat my words to her. This signals that while Alicia failed to respond, I'm still happy to help her out.

Your child must eventually learn that while you are always there on his/her side, non-responses are more work than interacting with you. And with others.