“Why Won’t You Just Listen?”

Understanding Neurodivergent Communication

A child can hear the words you are saying and still be unable to process, organise and respond to them in the way you expect. In neurodivergent families, what looks like not listening may involve attention regulation, language processing, sensory overload, working memory, anxiety, demand, difficulty switching focus or simply needing more time.

> The starting point is not: *How do I make this child listen?* It is: *What is happening between us, and how can I make this communication easier to receive and respond to?*

Listening is more than eye contact

Eye contact, stillness and an immediate verbal answer are culturally familiar signs of listening, but they are not reliable measures of understanding. Some autistic people listen better without looking directly at the speaker. A child with ADHD may move, doodle or fiddle while listening. Another child may appear attentive yet retain very little because working memory is overloaded.

Demanding eye contact or repeated confirmation can add cognitive load. Instead, check understanding in a neutral way: give one piece of information, allow processing time, and ask the child how they would like important information presented.

Processing time

Spoken language arrives quickly and disappears. A neurodivergent child may need extra time to decode the words, identify what is being asked, regulate an emotional response, formulate an answer and then speak it. Filling every pause with another question can restart that process. A pause is not necessarily refusal.

Try saying the important thing once, clearly. Then wait. For some children, writing the information down, using a visual prompt or returning to it later can dramatically reduce conflict.

ADHD: attention is not the same as caring

ADHD affects regulation of attention and executive functions. A child may become deeply absorbed in one activity and struggle to switch attention when called. They may begin a task and forget the second part of an instruction, interrupt because they fear losing their thought, or respond impulsively before fully hearing the question. These difficulties can be frustrating for everyone, but moral language such as lazy, rude or careless rarely improves executive functioning.

Helpful adaptations include gaining attention before giving information, reducing multi-step verbal instructions, using written or visual reminders, allowing movement, checking what the child actually heard, and building transition warnings into the day.

Autistic communication differences

Autistic communication can include literal interpretation, differences in conversational timing, prosody, non-verbal signalling, sensory processing and the way social meaning is inferred. Importantly, communication difficulty is not necessarily located only in the autistic person. The 'double empathy problem' describes how people with different ways of experiencing and interpreting the world can have reciprocal difficulty understanding one another.

> That changes the question from 'How do we teach the autistic child to communicate normally?' to 'How can both people understand each other's communication more accurately?'

When language disappears under stress

A child who can communicate fluently when regulated may have much less access to speech during overwhelm. Asking 'Why are you doing this?' in the middle of a shutdown or meltdown may require skills that are temporarily unavailable: emotional identification, memory, sequencing, language and perspective-taking.

Reduce language, reduce demands and prioritise regulation. The explanation can come later. If speech is difficult, accept other forms of communication such as typing, messaging, gesture, visual choices or AAC where appropriate.

Tone, directness and assumptions

Parents understandably react to tone. But tone can be an unreliable guide to intent in neurodivergent communication. A flat voice may not mean indifference. Direct wording may not be intended as disrespect. A louder voice may reflect excitement or poor volume regulation rather than aggression. Behaviour still has impact, but checking intent before assigning motive can prevent unnecessary escalation.

The conflict cycle

A familiar pattern is: the parent gives an instruction; the child does not respond quickly; the parent repeats it more firmly; the child becomes overwhelmed or defensive; the parent sees the reaction as proof the child was not listening; both increase intensity. Eventually the original request is almost irrelevant—the nervous systems are now responding to one another.

> Breaking the cycle usually requires the adult to change the conditions around communication, not simply repeat the same message louder.

What helps

Get attention gently. Use the child's name, move into their field of awareness or agree a cue.
Say less. One clear instruction is easier to process than a paragraph.
Be concrete. Replace vague instructions such as 'sort yourself out' with the actual action needed.
Allow latency. Give the brain time to respond.
Offer written communication. Important conversations do not have to happen face-to-face.
Separate listening from compliance. A child can understand you and still disagree.
Choose the moment. Hunger, fatigue, sensory overload and transitions affect communication capacity.
Repair after conflict. Show that relationships can survive misunderstanding.

What parents may need to hear

Adapting communication is not 'letting a child get away with things'. Accessibility and boundaries can coexist. You can maintain expectations while changing how they are communicated. A ramp does not remove the destination; it changes access to it. Communication accommodations work on the same principle.

What children may need to hear

You deserve to be understood, and other people may still need help understanding how you communicate. Learning ways to signal 'I need longer', 'please write it down', 'I heard you but I disagree', or 'I cannot talk about this yet' can increase autonomy without asking you to hide who you are.

When the child becomes an adult

Old communication roles can survive long after childhood. A parent may continue repeating instructions, demanding immediate replies, correcting tone or expecting explanations. The adult child may experience this as being treated as incapable, even when the parent's intention is concern.

Adult neurodivergent people can need substantial practical support and still have the right to autonomy. A useful shift is from instruction to collaboration: 'Would you like my help with this?' rather than 'This is what you need to do.'

Parents may also need to tolerate silence, delayed replies and decisions they would not make themselves. The adult child's independence is not evidence that the relationship has failed; ideally it is one of the things parenting has helped make possible.

Communication check-in

Before I speak: Is this urgent? Do I have their attention? Is this a good sensory/emotional moment? Can I say it more simply?

After I speak: Have I allowed enough processing time? Am I repeating because they did not understand, or because I dislike the answer?

If communication breaks down: What happened immediately beforehand? What did I assume about their intention? What might they have assumed about mine? What could we change next time?

Try replacing…

'I've told you three times.' → 'I don't think the way I'm giving this information is working. Shall we write it down?'
'Look at me when I'm talking.' → 'You don't have to look at me. I just want to check you're ready for the information.'
'Stop being rude.' → 'Those words landed sharply for me. What were you trying to communicate?'
'Answer me now.' → 'You can have some time. Tell me when you're ready to come back to this.'

Reflection worksheet

My child's/adult child's easiest way to receive information is:

_____

Signs they are becoming overloaded:

_____

Communication habits of mine that may increase pressure:

_____

What I tend to interpret as disrespect:

_____

Could there be another explanation?

_____

One adaptation we can try this week:

_____

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Sometimes the sentence 'Why won't you listen?' contains years of frustration on both sides. A parent may feel ignored and frightened that they cannot reach their child. The child may feel they have spent years listening while nobody has understood the enormous effort required to process what is being asked of them.

> Connection begins when we become curious about the gap between intention and experience. You do not need perfect communication. You need enough safety to misunderstand one another, repair, learn and try again.

References & further reading

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Evidence note: Neurodivergent people are diverse. No communication behaviour should automatically be attributed to autism or ADHD, and communication differences can also reflect language disorder, hearing differences, trauma, anxiety, learning disability, sensory factors, environment or ordinary individual variation. This resource is educational and is not a diagnostic assessment.

Space to Breathe Therapy