



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Little Pitchers Have Big Ears

Parents are often surprised to find out that their child has overheard adult conversations, even though it seemed as if they were not listening or were too far away to hear. Therefore, we recommend that, parents should avoid saying anything that they do not want children to hear and understand within their earshot. We also recommend that parents should avoid talking in front of children in ways that are incomprehensible to them. We would like to explain the basis for these recommendations.

Children hear more than we think: Children can do more than one thing at a time. Just as adults can watch television, do the dishes and listen to what is being said around them, children can play, run around, even talk – and also listen. Furthermore, there is no reliable way for parents to know whether or not their children are listening. Children's outward behavior does not reflect everything that is occurring in their mind, any more than an adult's outward behavior or words reveal everything about what they are thinking and feeling.

Children draw their own – often mistaken – conclusions: Children are always trying to understand their world. Therefore, they interpret and make conclusions about what they hear. Children may misinterpret snippets of grown-up discussions that they overhear, sometimes even becoming needlessly troubled or scared.

Ironically, the conversations that are least meant for children's ears might stubbornly remain with children, sometimes in very unhelpful ways. Children do not always bring up these conversations with their parents because they often sense that the conversation was not meant for their ears; they may even feel guilty about having overheard.

Sometimes children don't hear: Sometimes children truly don't hear a conversation that grown-ups are having in front of them. Perhaps children don't notice or are not interested. Another possibility is that they may be trying to not listen. Why might children make such an active effort to not listen, and how do they do it?

Children may feel troubled about what they are starting to overhear. They may sense that a grown-up is distressed, or they may realize from the parental tone of voice, big words or spelling that they are not supposed to be listening. In such situations, children are often able to divert themselves so that they avoid hearing. The ability to divert attention begins in the first year of life when children physically turn away from disturbing stimuli. By age 2, children have varied ways to divert themselves, such as by thinking about something else, engaging in activity or talking. Diversion is the perhaps the most basic defense mechanism at children's disposal that they can use to protect themselves from unpleasant experience. In fact, diversion, like all other defense mechanisms, most often occurs automatically without the person's self-awareness that it is occurring.

Defense mechanisms are necessary and useful. However, when children use diversion for the purposes of not hearing something that is occurring in their presence, they pay the price of feeling that the world is a bit indecipherable, inapproachable, incapable of being mastered – that the world is a bit less safe.

The following example illustrates an overheard conversation and a supportive parental response:

Marc and Jeremy, two 4-year-old classmates, were scheduled for an after preschool play date. When Mary, Marc's mother, arrived at the end of the school day, she was greeted by Jane, Jeremy's mother. Jane told Mary, "I am sorry, but I must cancel our plans. Jeremy's brother broke his arm last night and we need to return to the doctor. This just isn't a good day for a play date." After conveying her best wishes, Mary turned her attention to Marc who was pulling at her legs, saying "Mommmy," and appearing not to be listening. Mary said, "Marc, I am sorry, but you won't be able to have your play date with Jeremy today. His mother has to take

his brother to the doctor." Marc responded, "What is a broke arm, Mommy?" As they talked, Marc revealed his concern that broke arms stayed broke and needed to be thrown away.

Mary's willingness to explain the conversation that had occurred in her son's presence gave Marc permission to reveal that he had indeed listened but did not really understand what he had heard. Mary respected the fact that Marc paid attention to what was occurring around him and that Marc deserved to understand his world. Rather than being left with anxiety, confusion and a sense of his inability to master his world, Marc was provided the experience of successfully mastering a bit of anxiety and confusion. He was also relieved of any possible feeling that he might have done a wrong thing by listening to something that he was not supposed to hear.

Speaking appropriately in front of children is a fundamental way of showing respect for them. When parents treat children with respect, recognizing that they have active inner lives, children are better able to master challenges and are also being provided with a powerful modeling experience in treating others with respect and dignity.