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## Teaching Your Kids to Respect Work-Related Phone Calls at Home

by Christina Elston

It was every working parent's telephone nightmare.

"We had clients from Asia, Australia, the UK and New York on the phone, and I was listening in and offering advice," says Patricia Baronowski, a single mom and public-relations account supervisor. It was evening, and Baronowski was home with her children, ages 5 and 7. "Suddenly, my daughter started screaming. I covered the phone as fast as I could, then I heard someone from the UK say, 'Wow, someone is not happy!'"

**For kids who answer unsecured calls: 4 Tips for Telephone Safety**

Whether they're managing a home business or just taking occasional business calls after hours, many parents find it tough to maintain a professional image on the family phone. Only Baronowski's co-workers knew the noise had come from her line, but her employer was still less-than-pleased.

"What could I do?" she asks. "I couldn't stay late and take the call at work like everyone else because I had to get the kids from daycare by 6 p.m."

### Setting Boundaries

The advice from experts and working parents is to set boundaries that encourage children to treat your business calls with respect.

- **Take work-related phone calls in a place set aside for work.** Silvana Clark, an author and professional speaker, has a dedicated home office with a family-friendly plus: French doors. The closed doors signal that Mom is working, but the windows let her family peek in without disturbing her.
- **Avoid taking incoming calls when the kids are acting up.** "Resist the temptation to answer the phone if you think your child will not stay quiet for the duration of the call," advises Stacy DeBroff, an author who works out of her home. "Let voice mail pick it up, and return the call when you have restored quiet."
- **Make business calls, and return incoming calls, during blocks of time when you won't be interrupted.** "You cannot control when you're going to receive calls, but you can control when you are going to make your callbacks," explains Barry Izsak, president of the National Association of Professional Organizers.

- **List your call-back hours on your answering machine, so callers know what to expect.** "If your husband gets home at 5 p.m., you can say you're going to return calls between 5 and 6 p.m.," says

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Izsak. "Or, if the nanny is there in the morning, maybe you return calls between 8 and 10 a.m."

Experts also advocate setting "phone-free" hours when you focus completely on your family. "It sends a subtle message to kids that the phone is not running our life," says Susan Newman, Ph.D., a social psychologist at Rutgers University who has studied the dynamics of family telephone use.

Lisa Groen Braner, author of *The Mother's Book of Well-Being*, uses her business e-mail account as a telephone alternative. "Most people prefer to send a quick note by e-mail rather than picking up the telephone," she says. "It's faster, and clients will have another way to reach you."

### **Getting the Signal**

If you are on the phone when the children are around, use hand signals to communicate silently. Clark's family taught daughter Sondra to recognize her mother's "business call" signal at age 2, and Clark says it took only two or three "time-outs" before Sondra learned not to interrupt.

Maria Bailey, author of *The Women's Home-Based Business Book of Answers*, created a "secret handshake" for her kids to use in emergencies. Her return handshake tells them they'll have her attention as soon as she can end her call politely. "They know that I will not ignore that secret handshake," Bailey says. "In our house, it has totally cut down on interruptions."

### **Screening Your Calls**

Limiting kids' phone-answering privileges can also help maintain your professional image. Invest in a dedicated business line that only you answer, use your cellular phone as a business line, or have a second telephone number attached to your existing line. The business number will ring differently, and you can teach your children not to answer that ring.

Caller I.D. is another handy tool for identifying business calls, says writer Vickie Falcone. "Make an agreement that children only answer calls from friends and relatives whose numbers or names they recognize," Falcone suggests.

In Clark's single-line household, her husband and daughter don't answer the telephone on weekdays. Sally Taylor, an author and publisher who also has a one-line home, trained her family to answer professionally. "If anyone answers the phone before 7 p.m., they must say, 'Silly Goose Productions,'" she explains.

### **Answering Etiquette**

If you prefer to let your children answer the phone, teach them to do so politely and role-play what you want them to say.

"Obviously, the first couple of times you'll want to monitor them," advises children's etiquette instructor Corrine Gregory.

Kids should put the receiver down *quietly* if they leave the phone to tell you about a call, says Gregory. They should also end calls courteously, saying not only "good-bye" but "thank you for calling," she explains. "And, of course, businesspeople will fall out of their chairs afterwards,"

because this is an uncommon courtesy.”

### **May I Take a Message?**

Teaching children to use voice mail and take messages properly is essential, because lost business messages can spell disaster. One mother of an 8-year-old recalls her sudden regret over neglecting family phone training when her daughter answered a call intended for her advertising executive husband.

“He wasn’t home, so I hear my daughter say, ‘No, he’s not,’” she recalls. “Then my daughter says, ‘Yes, you can,’ and hangs up.” Her daughter thought that she was sending the call to voice mail, rather than hanging up on the caller – who turned out to be a prospective employer.

Teach your child to either write down each caller’s complete message, cheerfully, or to avoid picking up the phone. “If they’re not feeling particularly courteous and friendly, no problem. Let the answering machine get it,” says Falcone. Don’t let your kids ask clients or customers to call back and leave a message on the machine.

For written messages, Izsak suggests a phone log with carbon-backed pages, so you have a duplicate if the original message goes astray.

Keeping messages in a central location is also helpful. Bailey, a work-and-family expert for Office Depot, created a “family communication station” for herself and her four children. It includes mailboxes for every family member, and different colored self-sticking notes for each person’s phone messages.

### **The Call of the Child**

As your children approach the teen years, you’ll find that they would rather make their own calls than answer yours. Newman says good ground rules will help you manage this transition.

- **First, explain the purpose of the phone.** “This is a tool we use for emergencies, and to relay important information,” Newman says. Calling to ask about a homework assignment or to make plans with friends is acceptable. Chatting idly for hours at a time is not.
- **If you have call waiting, your child should always answer it,** and hand the phone over if the call is for you.
- **Enforcing time limits will keep your children’s calls from squeezing out business.** Clark signals for her daughter’s calls to end after half an hour, and is happy that Sondra often chooses to chat online with friends instead of using the phone.

### **When All Else Fails ...**

Sometimes, despite all your planning, the worst still happens. Baronowski’s son, now a teenager but not yet business-savvy, popped in a favorite rap CD during her call with a client from Hong Kong one recent evening. “Suddenly Jay-Z is blaring in the background,” she laments.

In these cases, you can only apologize and hope the people you are doing business with have a sense of humor.

"I guess (and am very grateful) that most people are quite understanding," Baronowski says. "I am still here – 13 years later!"

## RESOURCES

### Reading

- ***The Entrepreneurial Parent***, by Paul and Sarah Edwards and Lisa M. Roberts, Tarcher/Putnam, 2002. Offers practical advice for all aspects of earning a living at home. Includes a section with good tips on taking business phone calls at home.

- ***The Mother's Book of Well-Being***, by Lisa Groen Braner, Conari Press, 2003.

- ***The Women's Home-Based Business Book of Answers***, by Maria Bailey, Prima, 2001.

### On the Web

- **BlueSuitMom.com** – [www.bluesuitmom.com](http://www.bluesuitmom.com) – For working parents, this site offers a monthly newsletter, tips and resources.

- **The PoliteChild** – [www.politechild.com](http://www.politechild.com) – For matters of etiquette, this site offers lists of recommended books and movies, as well as a free parent newsletter.

- **The National Association of Professional Organizers** – [www.napo.net](http://www.napo.net) – Offers a free referral service online for working parents who want help with the telephone and other aspects of home life.

- **The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children** – [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com) – Offers tips on answering the phone and other safety matters, as well as resources.

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