

# *The Magic of* **15 MINUTES**



We can't emphasize this point enough—15 minutes every day is all it takes to build a deeper connection with your child

By **Aruna Sankaranarayanan**

*"Varun, switch off the TV."*

No response.

When his mother repeats her request after five minutes, Varun simply turns up the volume and continues to watch.

*"Sumana, have you done your homework?"*

The child however continues to message her friends, ignoring her dad. As he raises his voice to get her attention, Sumana marches to her room and bangs the door shut.

Parenting can seem like a battle of wills when children do not comply with basic requests. What do parents do when children refuse to wake up on time, eat home-cooked food or clean up their rooms? Parents usually try a gamut of techniques to get their kids to listen—from cajoling and yelling to threatening and, at times, even hitting. The tensions in these homes keep ratcheting up. Many a time, parents break down,

overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness.

For 22 years, I ran a center for children with learning difficulties in Bengaluru and Chennai. While we worked primarily in the areas of literacy and numeracy, often times parents would share problems that extended beyond the cognitive sphere. A parent would say, "My son just doesn't want to read." A few rounds of questioning would open up a Pandora's box of issues. A refusal to read, accompanied by noncompliance with practically any parental request.

In such instances, my team and I would often recommend one simple step, requiring only 15 to 20 minutes a day, that parents could

implement at home. And time and again, parents would return to us after 2–3 weeks, with broad smiles and gratifying reports. They would give us feedback—“My daughter has been calm this week,” “My son is much happier,” “It’s as if I have a different child,” or “Thank you for transforming my relationship with my kid.”

So, what was the magic bullet we offered them, and did it sustain over time? The step we advised is based on the first of an eight-step program devised by Dr Russell Barkley for promoting compliance in children and is outlined in his book, *Your Defiant Child*, which he co-wrote with Christine Benton. It involves spending at least 15 minutes every day with your child doing what the child likes, while keeping your critical radar in check. Although Dr Barkley recommends this program only for children who are under 12 years, we have found that this step can be effective even for some older kids, provided their defiance is not too entrenched. If a child has a serious behavioral issue, seek professional help.

As this is a time of bonding to gain your child’s trust, Dr Barkley recommends certain dos and don’ts for the program to be fruitful.

**1 Ask your child to pick an activity that they like, and say you would like to join in.** Initially, some kids, especially teens, may roll their eyes, or simply balk at the suggestion. But if you persist and do it right, even a wary and skeptical teen may begin to relish this time of shared togetherness. If your child is unable to suggest a joint activity, provide suggestions based on their interests. Choose an activity that your child naturally gravitates toward, be it doing a jigsaw puzzle, playing a board game, kicking a football, painting a landscape, baking cookies or pottering around in the garden. The activity doesn’t have to be “educational,” even blowing bubbles together can cement a relationship. What matters is that the

child has fun. With time, you too may look forward to this special time.

**Avoid watching TV together if you can:** The only activity that Dr Barkley dissuades parents from engaging in with kids is watching television, as it’s very passive and doesn’t foster joint attention. However, if you’re struggling to find an activity to do with your child, especially an older teen, you may start off by watching a TV show that your child picks. Gradually, as your relationship with your child begins to change, you may suggest another activity like cycling, playing video games, or stargazing.

**Try various activities:** You don’t have to stick to the same activity every time. One day you and your daughter can experiment with putting mehndi designs on one another, or you can both give each other makeovers. But don’t forget that your child has to want to engage in the task. If you have more than one child, try to spend quality time with each child separately, at least a few days a week. You may also do joint activities every now and then, provided all kids are amenable to the idea. Also, be flexible about timing. If a child is engrossed in a video game as your earmarked special time approaches, you may just hang around and watch with your kid if they’re okay with it.



**2 You must ensure that your inner critic stays quiet during the entire 15 minutes.** Make sure you don’t blame, judge or scold your child for any misbehavior, and refrain from asking provocative or probing

questions. Avoid issuing commands and directing their actions. Telling yourself that your child is the “boss” during this special time may help keep your tongue in check.

If your child spills paint while splashing colors, don’t admonish him. If your teen bakes a cake, don’t insist that she wash the dishes, too. During a game of tennis with your twins, curb your instinct to correct Isha’s grip of the racquet and Kunal’s faulty serve. Remember, you’re engaging in these activities not to improve your children’s skills or abilities, but simply to foster a connection with them.

**Empathize when your child misbehaves:** But what if your child tries to get under your skin by purposely banging on the table with a spoon? If the behavior is benign and unlikely to harm anyone, just ignore it. But if your child escalates their behavior by throwing things around, you may first show empathy toward your child by saying, “It looks like you’re very upset now. If you want to talk about something, let me know. We can do special time later in the day.” When your child has calmed down, you can resume special time.

**3 Your special time with your child should not be dependent on their behavior earlier in the day.** Don’t link this time to other things your child does or doesn’t do. For example, avoid saying, “If you don’t finish your homework, I won’t do special time with you.” What is “special” about this time is that you engage in it unconditionally.

Ultimately, you want to build bridges with your child to gain their cooperation and trust. Surprisingly, just 15 minutes a day can help you foster a loving connection with your child. Surely, every child deserves that amount of parental “investment”.

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Aruna Sankaranarayanan is the author of *Zero Limits: Things Every 20-Something Should Know*. She blogs at [www.arunasankaranarayanan.com](http://www.arunasankaranarayanan.com).