

Building Strong Families

Tips for Communicating with Children

This handout tells how important it is to listen to children. When parents listen, children feel respected and loved.

Below are four ways to help develop good listening skills:

1. Support with both words and actions.

Remember that not all messages are verbal (the words you say). Nonverbal communication also says a lot. What happens when you really look at a person's eyes? When you look angry? When you laugh? When you slam a door?

You show that you care with your words, face, voice, and body language.

2. Set a good example.

Encourage the child to keep talking. You can say things like: "Uh-huh," "Hmm, I see," "What happened next?" Nod your head; look interested.

Do not cut off the child before he or she is finished.

Show empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in his or her shoes.

3. Pay attention to the child when you listen.

Be available. Children need to feel that you're not too busy to talk.

When you and your child are together, try to choose a quiet spot when you have plenty of time. Stop what you're doing and turn off distractions. Give the child your undivided attention.

4. Repeat key ideas by restating them and then making them clear. This is called reflective listening.

Here are ways to do this:

- a) Paraphrasing (restating what you hear): "I hear you saying that you're really excited about that new TV show and would like to watch it."
- b) Make connections: "Do you think your insomnia could have anything to do with your upcoming exams?"
- c) Summarize what's been said and draw conclusions: "It seems you feel mostly scared about going to that new class."
- d) Point out inconsistencies: "I hear you saying that you want more freedom. Yet you are also saying that you want me to make these decisions for you."
- e) Check with the child to make sure you understand him or her correctly. "Are you saying that you don't want a party for your birthday?"

You can use reflective listening when:

- a) You hear or see feelings (sad, confused, depressed, angry).
- b) The other person "owns the problem." In other words, he/she has the problem, not you or other people.
- c) You care mainly about the other person's needs, and you want to help the person with his/her problem at that time.
- d) You can accept his/her feelings and responses, even if they are very different from yours.

- e) You trust that the child can handle his/her feelings, work through them, and solve problems.
- f) You see your child as someone separate from you--a unique individual no longer joined to you.

Here are examples of reflective listening:

- a) The child comes in and slams the door. Parent walks over to the child and squats to eye-level by him or her. *“Boy, you sound angry! Did something happen outside?”*
- b) The child yells, *“I hate that stupid teacher of mine.”*
“You’re really angry with your teacher.”
“Yes! She doesn’t ever explain the assignments.”
“And that really frustrates you.”
“Well, I couldn’t understand the math problem, and everyone laughed at me.”
“You felt really stupid and silly. It really hurt when they laughed at you.”

Remember: There are no “shoulds” in feelings. We all have strong feelings. They are neither right nor wrong--they simply are!

Reflective listening helps a child accept his or her feelings as honest and valid. When parents can accept and respect a child’s feelings, the feelings may become less strong over time. When parents listen reflectively, a child can become more self-aware and understanding.

Remember: It is hard for a child to reason when he/she is angry. Wait for the child to cool down. Sometimes a child will not be in the mood to share problems. A good listener knows when to back off and say, *“If you want to talk later, I’m here.”*