

## COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

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### LISTENING - the Skill.

#### **My child seems unhappy.**

Just like parents, children sometimes experience difficulties in their lives. Somehow, your child's needs are not being met, and he or she may experience many different feelings. They may feel: frustrated, angry, anxious, hurt, threatened, defeated, sad, frightened, embarrassed, defensive or disappointed.

Often, your child will not *say* that they are unhappy. You will just notice some signs of strong emotions that you can then translate as "my child is not happy". For example, they may:

- . come home from school, scowl at you and slam their bedroom door.
- . say "no!"
- . be withdrawn
- . cry
- . hit you or their brother or sister
- . "act out" - behave differently to their normal manner, often destructively.

The children aren't doing this to "get at" you, or to be "naughty". Something is going wrong in their life, and this is their way of expressing their upset.

When our children are unhappy, often we, as parents, think it is our job to help sort out their problem - to solve things for them. However, this can leave children feeling powerless and dependent – and leave us with a huge load to carry! We also might miss out on finding the *real* reason underlying their behaviour. Listening to, and problem-solving with, our child can help them *solve their own problem*, leaving them empowered, and your relationship stronger.

#### **What can I do?**

One of the best ways you can help your child is to *listen* to them. Active Listening is a special, and very effective, way of listening to your child. Using this technique helps parents help their children, without taking over.

#### **What are the benefits of active listening with my children?**

Children can:

- learn to understand and name feelings
- understand themselves better - what is happening - why he/she is upset, sad etc
- start the process of controlling their emotions, once they understand what they are feeling.
- reduce the number of times they get angry, or have tantrums.
- learn to solve their own problems, become more confident and have better self-esteem.
- feel better about their parents, and have a closer relationship with them.
- find that, often, when strong feelings are named, the intensity of feelings seems to reduce – the emotion is dissipated. The child is then able to work through his/her problem more easily.
- develop resilience and empathy

Parents can:

- find this an effective way to defuse angry situations, such as when the child is about to have a tantrum.
- gain a better understanding of their child from the child's perspective – what is happening to him/her; what he/she is feeling; why he/she isn't happy etc.
- show they respect their child as a person. Hopefully, your child will then respect you
- feel closer to their children
- find that children are more likely to listen to them

## How do I 'actively listen'?

There are three main parts to active listening.

1. Try to work out what your child is feeling.  
Your child may not know what they are feeling. Your job is to help them understand and name their feelings, based on what you can detect in their tone of voice, their manner, and what they are saying. This is the *most important* part of active listening.
2. Use the facts your child has given you.  
What is the child telling you about the situation as they see it? What is their perception of the facts of their story?
3. Combine the feelings and the facts in a "You statement".  
State what your child's actions tell you they're feeling, including some of the situation: "You're sounding....(feeling word)....because .....". Once you get the hang of it, you might like to try different ways of phrasing your active listening – otherwise, your children may get annoyed because you start the same way most of the time.

When you use active listening, you are trying to understand your child's experience - to see things from their point of view - and to help your child understand what is happening for them. This is a way of "walking in their shoes". *This must be done in a careful, accepting and non-directing way.* You must not try to manipulate your child when using active listening.

Here are some examples:

- Your toddler really objects when you want to change his nappy. He may run away, kick or scream.
  1. *What might the child be feeling?* Annoyed; or frustrated.
  2. *What are the facts?* Having their nappy changed; or wanting to keep playing.

An active listening response might be: "*You really don't want me to change your nappy*"; or. "*You seem frustrated, because you'd just like to keep playing*"

- Your four year old calls out for you during the night.
  1. *What might the child be feeling?* Scared; or confused.
  2. *What are the facts?* Waking alone, in the dark; or going to bed in parents' bed, then being moved to own bed.

An active listening response might be: "*You're scared when you wake up and it's dark*"; or "*You seem confused – when you went to sleep, you were in Mummy and Daddy's bed. Now you're in your bed*"

- Teenage girl comes home from school, slams her bedroom door, then comes out and sits moodily at the table.
  1. *What might the child be feeling?* Annoyed; or frustrated.
  2. *What are the facts?* She has just returned from school; or you knew she had a maths test yesterday.

An active listening response might be: "*Seems like you had a pretty bad day today*"; or "*You're looking pretty frustrated and upset.*"

- Your five year old falls off his bike and scrapes her knee on the bitumen. She begins to cry.
  1. *What might the child be feeling?* Sore; hurt; in pain.
  3. *What are the facts?* She has just fallen off her bike.

An active listening response might be: "*Looks like that knee is really hurting you!!*"

## When should I use active listening?

Active listening is useful when:

- a) your child is displaying feelings – they may feel sad, angry, frustrated, frightened, and so on. By active listening, you can help your child sort their feelings out for themselves. They may then work out, or ask your help to work out, what they can do to help resolve the problem.

- b) you and your child have a conflict. This is very difficult to do, but is worthwhile trying. Using active listening when your child is annoyed with you, or by something you have asked them to do, helps:
- . you understand why your child is defensive
  - . your child feel she is still important to you – that you are trying to understand things from her perspective – and that you know how hard it is to change, even though you would still like her to change her behaviour.

*Warning* – do not actively listen too long to your children when they are angry with you. They may begin to feel as though you are just deflecting their point of view.

### **Is there anything I should avoid when I know my child is unhappy?**

When you detect that your child is not happy, there are some ways of talking that are best avoided. These are called “roadblocks”, because they can block effective communication. Below is an outline of these ineffective responses. It might be useful to think about the way you feel when any of these responses are used on you, when you talk about a problem to someone.

#### Solutions

Solutions include giving advice, lecturing, ordering, threatening, and moralising. If we give any of these responses to our children when they are unhappy, they are very likely to “turn off”, and to stop talking. It’s as though we’re telling them that we don’t trust them to be able to help themselves. Telling children OUR solutions to THEIR problems can be disempowering, and may not solve the real problem.

#### Judgements

This is when we criticise, use put-downs, call children names (such as “silly” or “cry-baby”), blame them or ridicule them. Children will not feel good about themselves – and they won’t think much of us, either.

#### Discounts

When we reassure, console, sympathise or agree, we may (unintentionally) be denying the child’s feelings and experience. For example, if a child fell down, scraped her knee and began to cry, a parent may say, “Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt much, you’ll get better soon”. In fact, the child’s knee IS hurting, and she may feel confused and misunderstood. We have discounted her experience. Active listening - “your knee really hurts” - can actually soothe the pain, and stop the tears.

#### Questions

When we ask questions, we can stop children talking. It may seem like we are gathering data, so that we can solve things for them (this is disempowering for the child). Questions can divert the child from their real problem, whereas active listening goes with the child, and does not lead. If you ask a question, ask yourself “why do I want to know? Is it to meet my needs, or that of my child?” Often, we ask questions because WE want to know, not because it is best for the child.

#### Avoidance

We may use tactics like humour, sarcasm, distraction, withdrawing, or changing the subject, in order to divert the child, or avoid discussing the child’s issue. The child may then feel that we regard his problem as unimportant, or that the parent does not care.

Reference: [“P.E.T. Parent Effectiveness Training”, by Dr Thomas Gordon.](#)