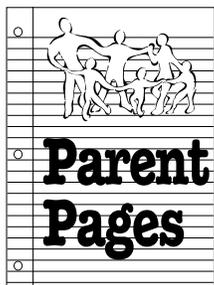


Parents Can Be Better Listeners



"My kid won't listen!" is a common lament among parents. While it's undeniable that some kids tune parents out, hear only half of the message and refuse to cooperate, it's equally true that some parents do not always listen well.

Perhaps parents should examine their own example. When your child wants to talk with you, do you feel compelled to give her advice or correct her ideas? Do you interrupt with questions or criticisms? Do you do other things while your son or daughter is speaking? If so, you are not only disrupting effective communication, you may be modeling some of the very behaviors that drive you crazy. What can a parent do instead? One technique of effective communication that parents can learn is active listening.

What is active listening?

Active listening occurs when the listener really tries to understand the message of the speaker. The listener gives the speaker her full, respectful attention and avoids making judgments. An active listener will employ the following skills:

Show attention

The listener demonstrates his attention and interest by positioning his body comfortably close to the speaker and maintaining respectful eye contact.

Use non-intrusive encouragers

The listener uses minimal, non-verbal and verbal signals that encourage the speaker to say more. Non-verbal signals include occasional nods or smiles, while verbal signals might include expressions like, "Uh-huh," "ok," or "I see."



Use open-ended questions

The listener asks questions that help him understand the speaker's message or help the speaker explore his ideas in more depth or detail. The questions do not challenge, redirect, provoke or threaten the speaker.

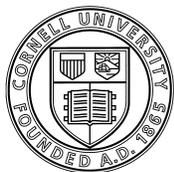
Respond reflectively

The listener will reflect the speaker's ideas and/or feelings in the situation in a neutral, non-judgmental way.

How does active listening help?

Parents who want to communicate respect and acceptance choose reflective responses rather than judgmental ones. Consider the difference between these two approaches in the following situation.

~Continued~



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Situation:

A seven year old comes home from school looking disheartened with slumped shoulders and says, "Rachel and I had a fight."

Judgmental Response:

Parent says, "Well, it's not that bad" (discounting the way the child feels), then adds, "You shouldn't fight, you know better." (preaches to child)

Reflective Response:

Parent says, "You look so sad" and pauses. Child replies, "Well, she called me bad names," to which the parent responds, "You're really feeling miserable and upset with Rachel. Want to talk about it?" (Notice that the parent did not tell the child about the value of friendship or what to do in a fight.) The whole purpose of active listening and reflective responding is to motivate the child to continue talking and arrive at her own conclusions about the matter. Reflective responding shows your interest in your children's ideas and your acceptance of their feelings.

What else can a parent do?

Parents can encourage the sharing of ideas and feelings and open the door to further discussion in the following ways.

- ◆ Invite your child to talk to you. Respond to your child's opening remark by saying, "Let's talk about it" or "You have a right to express how you feel." All of these remarks really say, "I accept how you feel. Let's keep talking."
- ◆ Help children identify their feelings. Teach them the words they need to be articulate and accurate in expressing their feelings. Model the appropriate behavior by using words to describe your own feelings. Instead of saying, "I'm upset," say, "I'm feeling very sad and discouraged because I didn't get the job."

- ◆ Talk about topics of interest to your children. You can gain a new understanding into the world of your pre-teen or teenager.
- ◆ Choose topics that everyone can talk about. Talking about the "scariest moment I ever had" or "what I want to be when I grow up" (appropriate for parents, too) during family get-togethers fosters involvement by each family member.
- ◆ Spend time together. You may have to re-order your priorities and drop some commitments that take time away from the family.

When parents really listen to their children, they show their children how to be good listeners. They also reduce misunderstanding and learn more about their children's ideas, feelings and motives. Finally, respectful listening and effective communication is the cornerstone of mutually satisfying relationships between parents and children.

Source: Adapted by Tim Jabn, Human Development Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County; from Bonnie Westendorf, Extension Educator, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.