
Build a Strong Relationship with your Children – 9 Rules for Active Listening

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The goal to effective communication with children is to have mutual respect and practice being an active listener. Both parent and child are allowed to express their thoughts, beliefs, concerns, and feelings honestly without fear of being ridiculed or belittled. This means respectfully active listening and accepting what the other person is saying. This does not mean that you must agree with them, only that you are listening well enough that you can paraphrase back to them their thoughts or concerns.

Following are 9 rules for active listening to effectively communicate:

- **Take Responsibility for Your Tone of Voice**

This process of active listening is both verbal and nonverbal. Your facial expressions and tone of voice will reflect whether or not you really care and are listening. You can communicate nonverbally through a nod of the head, a smile, or a touch.

- **Establish and Keep Eye Contact**

Establishing eye contact with them while they are talking indicates you are actively listening to what they want to say.

- **Keep Calm – Stay Silent**

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- **Focus on the Content – Recognize Their Pain**

Once they have communicated what is on their mind, let them know that you recognize their feelings. It may be that they are angry, hurt, or perhaps very sad, whatever it is acknowledge you understand their pain.

- **Do Not Judge**

Do not judge by putting words in their mouth or jump to conclusions. When you are silent and not interjecting communicates acceptance and that you are being nonjudgmental.

- **Do not Interrupt, Ask Questions, or Interject Comments Until They are Done**

Children sometimes have a hard time expressing what they are feeling and will be lost for words for a few moments. Let them be hesitant or stammer for a bit, acknowledging that you are still listening by a nod of the head, or a comment of encouragement like “take your time”.

- **Paraphrase Back to Them What you Heard**

When a child or teen is upset, they tend to lose perspective of the issue. This is the time to paraphrase back to them what they said and then to clarify you are correct in what you heard. This will give the assurance that they were heard. It is also nonjudgmental, so it encourages them to keep talking and share more details about what is on their mind.

- **No “Why” Questions**

When you ask “Why” it causes them to feel they are being attacked and judged. Asking a child “Why” can be very intimidating to them, it cause them to shut down and not continue the conversation with you.

- **Ask Open-Ended Questions**

If your child, at this point seems embarrassed or unsure, you can attempt to help them with an open-ended question like “Would you like to tell me more about it?”. It is important to let your child take the lead here. It is important that you don’t force the child to share more of their feelings. This may have taken a lot of courage to just have the initial talk and your pushing for more may be seen as an attempt to invade their space. Offer to set up another time to talk, allow your child to accept or reject your offer. Don’t be discouraged if the child does not respond quickly, they may need to spend some time thinking on the situation before getting back to you.

If your child does not respond right away, it could be a good thing. Children can’t always work out their problems to conclusion during the listening session. Your acceptance of them may have given them the confidence to help them see the problem more clearly and enabled them to handle the problem all on their own, without requiring another talk. If not, allow some time to pass and offer again to have a discussion and take their lead, in any case it will convey that you have not forgotten about them.

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