

Listening to Your Children

"Ouch! Mommy, I cut my finger and it hurts."
 "Don't be silly, Judy. It couldn't hurt. There's not even any blood."

"Daddy?"
 "Mmmmmmm."
 "I cleaned up my room today all by myself. Daddy?
 DADDY!"
 "What is it, Ronald?"



What do kids have to say? A lot. But many parents think they have nothing to learn from their children. Some even assume they know just what their children are thinking and feeling most of the time.

And so instead of listening, they talk. Instead of watching, they ignore. They lecture and preach. They judge and direct. They blame and scold. Only rarely do they just . . . listen. And even when they do, it may be with only one ear.

But listening to children is as important as talking with them. Children have their own special thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows, hopes, and fears. When you open yourself up to what your children have to say, you'll be rewarded with a fascinating look into how they think and learn. You'll get to know them better and deepen your relationship with them.

Most important, you'll boost your children's self-confidence by showing them you value what they have to say.

Translating the message



Children have many reasons for wanting you to listen. Sometimes they want sympathy, sometimes attention. Sometimes they want to share important moments with you. And sometimes they need help figuring things out.



Children don't always fully understand what they are thinking and feeling. They can't always say exactly what they mean. "I hate the new baby" may really mean "I'm scared that you don't love me anymore."

Body talk

There are ways of speaking besides with words. Children's bodies and behavior have a language of their own. Even young babies are fluent in this language: they reach out to you with their arms when they want to be picked up, and they choose from a whole repertoire of cries to tell you whether they are tired or hungry, wet or bored.

Older children also give us cues through their facial expressions, postures, gestures, movements, actions, and tone of voice. In fact, body language and behavior are two of the most reliable ways of listening to children. Drooping shoulders speak with more force than the words "I'm sad." Purposely breaking a new toy can be a very effective way of getting attention when words have failed.

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H E L P I N G • C H I L D R E N • G R O W

The better to hear you with

Listening is an active process that demands your full attention. Real listening means putting down the newspaper or turning off the iron to focus on what your child is trying to say. It is a skill, but one that all parents can learn by following these simple guidelines:

- Let your children know you are available to listen to them.
- Avoid interrupting or judging when your children are talking.
- Ask questions or repeat what your children are saying if you are not sure you understand.

You may not always like what your children have to say. Sometimes you won't agree. Sometimes you won't be sure how to respond. But if your children want you to listen, they have a need. So let them lead the way: respect their feelings, listen to their point of view, and try to find out what's going on inside them. Things may not be what they seem and you might learn something.

Listening and learning



our children's needs and problems may not always be obvious, so you may have to listen and observe carefully to uncover what they're really thinking and feeling.

Here is how one father tried to find out what was behind his 4-year-old daughter's angry words. Note the different strategies he used: responses to show that he was listening; silence; responses to encourage her to go on; and repetition of what she said to show that he understood.

Joanna: I hate Mrs. O'Grady.

Father: You're angry at Mrs. O'Grady?

Joanna: Yes, and I don't want her to come and take care of me anymore.

Father: Oh.

Joanna: She's a stupid babysitter. She thinks Bobby's so nice. I hate Bobby, too.

Father: You're angry at your brother, too?

Joanna: Yes. He gets to do everything, just because he's bigger. He thinks he's such a big shot.

Father: (Silence)

Joanna: Like today he got to go to the movies with his friends. And I had to stay home. It's not fair. Just he got to go.

Father: You wanted to go to the movies too?

Joanna: Yes, but Mrs. O'Grady wouldn't let me. She said I have to wait until I'm older. She's so dumb.

Father: Did anything else happen?

Joanna: Well, I cried. And Billy called me a baby and said that's why I couldn't go to the movies.

Father: Billy teased you and that made you feel even worse?

Joanna: Yes. He thinks he's so big.

Father: Sounds like today wasn't a good day for you.

Joanna: No. Today was a bad day. Bobby got to have all the fun and I didn't get to do anything.

Father: I'm sorry to hear that, because you're a very special person too. Did you know that?

Joanna: No.

Father: Yes, and you know what else? It's only 6:30, and you don't have to go to bed for another hour, so we have time to think up something fun to do together.

Joanna: Just you and me?

Father: Just the two of us. So what'll it be, little shot?

Joanna's father knew that Mrs. O'Grady was a good babysitter and that Joanna really liked her. Reminding Joanna of this or scolding her for her anger would only have made Joanna more hostile. By trying to get to the root of Joanna's feelings, her father was able to find out what was bothering her. Once he realized that she was just feeling left out and unimportant, he was able to let her know that she, too, was very special.

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