

Listening

Reflect on your normal day with your child. How much do you talk, and how much do you listen? How often during today did your child experience good listening from you and the feeling of being understood? (You'll know because they will nod, say 'yeah', or breath a sigh of relief). For a child, knowing that they are understood by you builds a sense of connection that is at the heart of all good relationships.

Did you listen, only to then give them your opinion, advice, instructions or a lecture? Did you listen to decide if you agreed or disagreed with what they said, or to secure compliance. Did you disagree, reason, judge, or persuade? This is what we are trained to do from our early years, but it is not listening. All of these are roadblocks to good listening.

There are two parts to being a good listener. The **goal**, and the **process**.

The Goal of Listening

The goal of good listening is to *understand what a person wants to say to us*.

Most of the time when we disagree with someone we withhold a sense of understanding. Children become discouraged when they consistently have the experience of being unheard or misunderstood by a parent/carer. Over time, their capacity and desire to form lasting, intimate relationships is, in many cases diminished.

The Process of Listening

The process of good listening involves *letting the other person know that we have heard and understood what has been said*. It does not involve questions, instructions or teaching. It involves giving feedback by saying in our own words what we have heard our child say. This is called 'to paraphrase'. We must intentionally give signals and indications that make it clear we understand. It is not complicated, but most of us haven't been taught how to do this, and have not often experienced it ourselves. It takes conscious effort to become a habit.

Barriers to Listening

It is common to experience difficulty being a good listener when the other person is expressing strong emotions like anger or sadness. Instead of reflecting the feelings being expressed we often find ourselves jumping in to persuade, sweet-talk, or (in the case of anger) becoming angry ourselves. When do you notice this happens for you and your child?

You may feel that you want to shield their children from all unhappiness and pain. But when as parents we step in to comfort, we may also ignore our child's experience, essentially leaving them alone with their feelings. What your child really wants is to sense that you understand what they feel.

Examples of Reflective Listening

Child: Crying, "I want my mummy," Adult: "You wish your mum was here now and you are feeling sad."

Child: "John is being mean. He won't let me play with him." Adult: "You really want to play with him, and you feel angry and sad about that."

Child: (to parent) "I hate you! You never let me do anything." Adult: "You are angry and frustrated right now. It seems like I never let you do what you want".

Child: "I don't want to go shopping. I hate that place ... it's so boring." Adult: "I know you're tired after school and you want to go home. This is the only time I have to do what I have to do. I promise to be as quick as I can."