



Counselor's Corner

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Actively Listening to Encourage Positive Communication

“Active listening” can be a powerful tool to improve communication and build a positive relationship with children. Actively listening to your child is more than just simply hearing him or her. Active listening is a learned and strategic skill which fosters independence, teaches respect and responsibility, and develops a capacity for empathy. Learning active listening skills also increases understanding, cultivates awareness, and helps individuals become effective communicators and positive problem solvers. Hearing is reflexive in nature; we still hear noises when we sleep. However, active listening requires practice and effort.

You can demonstrate active listening by:

- getting close to your child when he/she is speaking;
- looking into your child's eyes. Give them your full attention, so they know they're being heard and understood;
- allowing your child to talk without interruption and avoiding questions that break his/her train of thought;
- showing your child you're interested by nodding your head and making comments like “I see” or “That sounds hard/great/tricky ...”

It is important to remember that listening is not the same as agreeing. You can understand and respect another person's point of view without actually agreeing with it.

Get into the “here and now.” Modeling the behavior we want in our children is an integral part of the process. If you notice your mind has wandered, bring it back to what your child is saying. It can help to turn off the TV, your mobile phone, and other devices. Giving your undivided interest and attention, sends the message that your child is the most important thing to you right now. It says that you're available and interested in what he/she is thinking, feeling, and doing.

Try to understand. Concentrate on what your child is saying rather than thinking about what you're going to say next. Are you missing their point while you think about your own? What is he/she trying to tell you and why?

Show you're trying to understand. Summarize your child's main points and how you think he/she might be feeling. Try repeating what your child is saying in your own words. For example: “Let me see if I've understood. You're feeling disappointed because I didn't talk to you before making plans for this weekend. I can understand that.” Try to avoid making judgments in your summary. For example, it is judgmental to say, “You always get so frustrated when you lose a game! You need to be a better sport!” It is nonjudgmental to say, “I recognize it can be frustrating to lose after you've worked so hard.”

Using active listening and repeating back the speaker's words often acts as an invitation because your child feels heard. This can encourage your child to explain further or to say more about what he/she is thinking.

Giving children the freedom to express their feelings and deal with their emotions permits them to grow. Utilizing active listening strategies teaches children to take ownership of their feelings and encourages positive problem solving.

Adapted from “*How to Talk So Kids will Listen and Listen So Kids will Talk*” by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

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