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Learning to Listen

By Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

One of the most important skills that contributes to feelings of closeness and support in a family is the ability to communicate. Studies show that listening makes up a major part of all types of communication. Listening is especially important with children because they do not have as much experience as adults in identifying or talking about their feelings. Learning how to communicate feelings constructively contributes to a child's ability to deal with feelings without "acting them out."

To listen well takes concentration. It is also a skill that improves with practice. On the other hand, it is easy to acquire poor listening habits. For example, have you ever begun listening to someone only to find yourself thinking about something else? Not paying attention like this is one of the most basic pitfalls we can get into. Another one is thinking that we have to "do something" when all our child wants us to do is to listen. Giving advice when we are asked to listen, or telling them how to solve their problems often has the opposite effect. It conveys to the child that we do not believe that he can solve problems on his own and contributes to feelings of inadequacy. Telling a child that his feelings are irrational, or that what he is saying makes no sense is another sure

way to stop him in his tracks. Denying a child's feelings also puts a stop to his accepting any feedback or input that we might have to give. When we don't listen to our children, they end up spending all of their time and energy trying to convince us that their feelings are real, rather than feeling understood, or trying to understand for themselves how they feel. There is a big difference between hearing and listening.

Effective listening is very difficult to do. Sometimes we are so busy thinking ahead to what we want to say and rehearsing how we are going to say it, that we miss the other person's message. At other times, we might be so interested in getting our own point across that we don't listen to the other person's point of view. It is common also for parents to get defensive when their children bring up certain subjects. However, communication is enhanced when the parent is able to listen to what the child has to say without taking it as if the child is being judgmental. It sometimes helps to think that listening to what the other person has to say does not necessarily mean that you agree with him. More often than not, the act of listening and communicating that you understand does more to diffuse a difficult situation than quickly trying to smooth it over. Sometimes a person just needs



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understanding and empathy. Another skill that will improve your ability to listen is paying attention. This includes watching for non-verbal messages from your child, such as body language, as well as giving your own non-verbal feedback that you are listening. This might involve nodding your head, smiling, and making eye contact. It is also important not to be too impatient. If you are on the phone it might be better to tell your child what would be a good time for you to listen, rather than to pretend you are listening when you are really not.

There are also a couple of things that I do as a psychologist to improve my ability to listen and to convey to the other person that I understand them. I reflect back to the person what I think they are saying to me.

This means that I repeat what the person just said to me but with slightly different words. Sometimes I do this with the sole purpose of letting the other person know that I am listening. However, another good reason to do this is that it gives the other person the chance to correct any misunderstanding. I also try to reflect back the feelings that the person may have. For example, "Sounds like you had a really tough time," or "You look angry." At other times I ask questions to encourage the person to say more. How did you feel when that happened? What did you say then?

Listening is one of the best ways to keep the lines of communication open. Children who feel listened to by their parents are more likely to listen to their parents. Their self-esteem is higher and they are more likely to respect themselves and others too.



About the Author

Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D., is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist and leading expert in the field of ADHD, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He is also a foremost consultant and sought after speaker for numerous medical, academic, business and legal professionals and organizations. Throughout his career, Dr. Katz has been interviewed by many print, radio and TV outlets and served as a regular columnist for *Tidewater Parent* magazine. He is also co-author of the recently released book ***365 +1 Ways to Succeed with ADHD***. A graduate of the California School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Katz has been in private practice in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area for more than 25 years.

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