



LISTENING:

The Key to Effective Communication between Parent and Child

Listening shows your child that she is important to you, that you are there for her no matter what, and that she is not alone. If your child feels listened to she will be more likely to come to you for help in the future.

It matters less what you say and more how you listen! Your ability to guide your child through life's challenges depends on how well you can listen to the whole story first and then offer your thoughts.

Use the tips below to consider how to be the most effective listener.

● DO NOT INTERRUPT

- > **Do not judge or criticize what your child says.**
- > **Never put down or dismiss something your child is feeling.**

● DO BE A SOUNDING BOARD

- > **Show genuine concern and interest in what your child says.**
- > **Listen to your child until she is done speaking.**
 - Keep the conversation going with phrases that show you are listening like, "Hmmm", "Oh", and "Tell me more."
 - > The goal of being a sounding board is to allow your child's ideas to "bounce off" of you.
 - Sometimes, the process of sharing her ideas out loud with you will help her come to her own solutions.
 - Other times, your repeating her ideas ("I think I hear you saying...") will be enough to help her identify solutions.

● DO NOT TRY TO SOLVE YOUR CHILD'S PROBLEMS

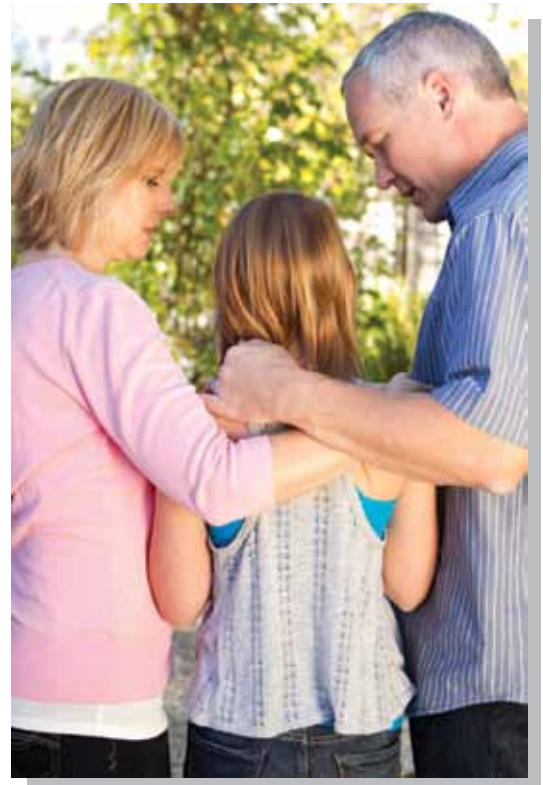
- > **Try not to provide your child with all the answers.**
 - When you give all the answers, you also give your child the indirect message that you do not think she is capable of solving the problem on her own, and that you do not have confidence in her ability to succeed without your help.
 - > Giving all the answers can also set your child up to avoid making decisions altogether, especially when she needs to make tough ones without you around. Remember, "practice makes perfect." Children need the chance to problem solve in order to get better.
 - You can help your younger children get this practice by:
 - > Reading problem-solving stories together and discussing how the characters figured out winning strategies.
 - > Trying some do-it-yourself projects together to help her learn how to problem solve step-by-step. Make sure you notice how well she can come up with solutions with just a little thought!



- > **Do not tell your child how she should feel.**
 - Part of raising an emotionally intelligent child is guiding her to describe feelings in her own words.
 - When adults tell children not to feel so badly (“It’s not such a big deal”) children feel as if we haven’t really been listening.
 - It is hard to see your child hurting and sometimes our reactions are even stronger than hers would be. This can actually increase the intensity of her emotions, making it less likely she will be able to get over something.

● **DO LISTEN MORE THAN YOU TALK**

- > **Allow your child to work through her feelings.**
 - “How did that make you feel when Dimitri told you that his old girlfriends used to get high with him?”
- > **Use open-ended questions to support your child in thinking about different parts of the issue and coming up with her own answers.**
 - “Why do you think he told you that?”
 - “What do you think about how he likes to get high?”
 - “How does that change the way you think of him or your relationship?”
 - “You’re good at coming up with solutions, what ideas do you have to work through this?”
 - “How do you think you will handle it if he suggests to you that you get high with him?”

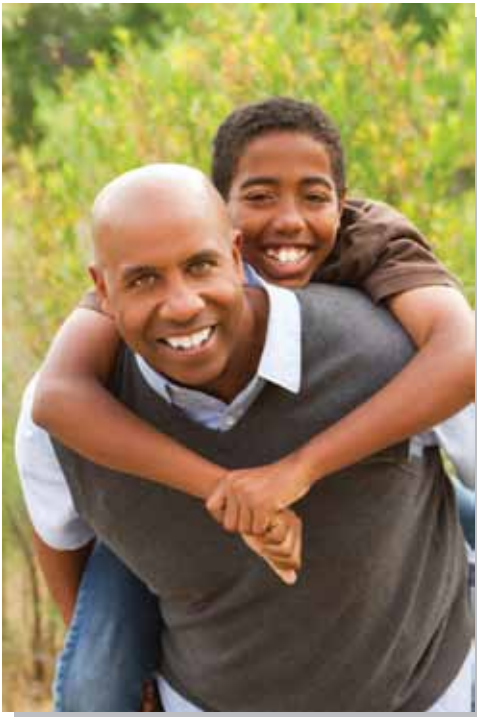


● **DO NOT REACT**

- > **Do not immediately assume the worst. Get all the facts before making a judgment.**
 - If you react strongly to what your child says, she’ll learn to stop talking.
 - > Sometimes you’ll hear your teen say, “That’s why I never tell you anything!”, but more likely you’ll hear silence.
 - Turn off the “Parent Alarm” that sounds off as soon as you feel the need to protect your child.
 - > “Mom, the coach told me I couldn’t start in the next game” might make you want to say “Well, I’ll call him right away.” This might prevent your son from telling you that he is overwhelmed between school, other extra-curricular activities and chores, and has wanted to quit the team since the beginning of the season. He may be too ashamed to tell you.
 - **Instead say,** “Tell me more about your conversation with your coach. What do you think about his decision?”
 - > “Dad, I met this girl and she’s awesome” might make you want to say “You’re too young to date.” Maybe your son wasn’t even thinking of dating, but wanted to have a real conversation about sexual feelings. He may never tell you and you’ll miss a critical opportunity.
 - **Instead say,** “Sounds like you really like this girl. Tell me about her. What is she like?”
 - > “Mom, Sara said some really mean things to me” might make you want to say “I’ll call her mother and make sure that she minds her own business. You won’t be playing there again.”
 - **Instead say,** “I’m so sorry to hear that. It sounds like she hurt your feelings. Why don’t you tell me the whole story from the beginning.”

● DO ENSURE THEIR PRIVACY

- > **One of the first things many people do when they are upset is to reach out to others and share what is going on.** You may even want to do this with information your child or teen has told you. Preteens and teens are especially sensitive to their private information being shared.
 - Create a private space where your child can tell you whatever is on his mind.
 - Have an open discussion with your teen about how you will keep his information private. It is important for him to know under what conditions you will share information with his other parent. He needs to know that if his concern seems to be very serious and you are truly worried about him, you might need professional guidance. But for now, you just want to listen.
 - > *“I know what you are sharing with me about Tim’s older sister buying beer for him is personal. I really appreciate you coming to me about it. I love you so much and am proud of the person you are becoming. I hope you know that you can always come to me with any problems or concerns. And I want you to know that I will keep what you tell me private, unless I’m worried about your safety. If your safety becomes an issue I may need to talk to your Dad about this. But for now, I just want to listen and find out what you think about everything.”*



● DO BE AWARE OF YOUR BODY LANGUAGE

- > **Show your child you are ready to listen.** Sit down, shut off the TV, ignore the phone and texts.
 - Give your child your undivided attention.
 - > Nod your head in reaction to what he says.
 - > Maintain eye contact.
 - Remember that you can react both with your words and with your body. As best as possible, try to sit in a way that makes you appear calm. Deep breaths might help.

● GET YOUR CHILD TALKING AND KEEP HIM TALKING!

- > **Ask your child about what interests him or her.**
- > **Set aside time to check in and just talk with your child every day. Talk at dinner time or during your ride home from school.**
- > **If you have been talking about a problem, follow up a day or two later to see how the solution worked.**
 - If the solution worked, great! Celebrate it.
 - If the problem has not resolved, congratulate him on the steps that have been taken. Keep listening to the next steps he might consider.

All children need to build their confidence in their ability to handle problems. This is especially true for children as they approach adolescence and really want to prove their independence. Teens may reject someone who does not believe that they can handle their own problems, but at the same time, they do really want guidance. The key is to listen to our children in a way that communicates our faith that they can learn to handle things on their own.

Thank YOU

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SOURCES:

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Katrina Ellis, Tips for tackling common family challenges, FOCUS: Family Resiliency Training for Military Families (<http://www.focusproject.org>)

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