



Parents Can Use Active Listening

“My kid won’t listen!” is a familiar refrain among parents, but how many parents are good listeners themselves? Some parents believe they are good listeners, but might be surprised to hear how they sound if they taped their conversations. Their responses are often loaded with criticism, lectures, commands, questions and sermons.

Parents who want to really understand what children are feeling and saying can practice a better way to communicate. Active listening is a process that shows

- ς You understand the child’s words
- ς You understand the child’s feelings in the situation
- ς You accept his words and feelings in a non-judgmental way

Comments like; "Don't feel that way," and "You don't really mean that" are certain communication stoppers. Parents who want to let their children know that they're accepted and valued choose reflective responses rather than judgmental ones. Consider the difference between these two approaches.

A seven-year old comes home from school looking disheartened with slumped shoulders and says, "Rachel and I had a fight."

Judgmental Response - Parent says, "Well, it's not that bad," (discounting the way the child feels) then adding, "You shouldn't fight. You know better."

Reflective Response - Parent says, "You look so sad" and pauses. Child replies, "Well, she called me bad names," to which the parent responds, "You're really feeling miserable and upset with Rachel, want to talk about it?" (Notice that the parent did not tell the child about the value of friendship or what to do in a fight.)

Reflective responding shows your interest in your children's ideas and your acceptance of their feelings. The following ways to respond encourage sharing of ideas and feelings, and open the door to further discussion.

- Invite your child to talk to you. Respond to your child's opening remark by saying, "Let's talk about it" or "You have a right to express how you feel." All of these remarks really say, "I accept how you feel. Let's keep talking."

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- Ask open-ended questions that encourage children to share their feelings and ideas. These are difficult to answer with a yes or no. For example, ask, "What did you do in school today?" instead of "Did school go well today?"
- Help children identify their feelings. Teach them the words they need to be articulate and accurate in expressing their feelings. Model the appropriate behavior by using words to describe your own feelings. Instead of saying "I'm upset," say "I'm feeling very sad and discouraged because I didn't get the job."
- Talk about things of interest to your children. You can gain a new understanding into the world of your pre-teen or teenager.
- Choose topics that everyone can talk about. Talking about the "scariest moment I ever had" or "what I want to be when I grow up" (appropriate for parents, too) during family get-togethers fosters involvement by each family member.
- Spend time having fun together. You may have to re-order your priorities and drop some commitments that take time away from the family.

By being more honest about your own feelings and listening to your children as you would listen to a good friend, you can reduce misunderstanding and develop a closeness based on trust and acceptance.

Source: Bonnie Westendorf, Extension Educator, at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Columbia County. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.