**LISTENING TO YOUR CHILDREN**

**GOOD LISTENING REQUIRES A GOOD RELATIONSHIP**

* **Be present**
  + Distractions:[[1]](#footnote-1)
    - Functioning

If you decide to listen, put down the dishrag, trowel, wrench, etc. and focus on them.

* + - Time constraints

Consider whether your schedule needs to trump an opportunity to connect.

If the schedule is tight, tell them that you really want to hear them but cannot right now. Make sure, however, that you do get back with them.

* + - Interruptions

Maybe you can let the phone ring for the sake of listening.

Maybe you have to tell someone else that you and this child need a moment before you can connect.

Maybe you can have someone run interference with a high needs child while you attend to this one.

* + - Electronics
    - Entertainment
  + Creating focused time
    - Take them on errands. Car time can be very helpful for listening.
    - Bedtime is often a good time
    - Play time/Coloring is often a good time (age dependent)

Younger children express themselves through play. As you play with them, they will often be working out problems.

Notice...ask them “how does she (the toy; the character in a story they’re telling)...feel”; “what does she want to do about it?” (note: if it’s something morally wrong...validate...then wonder aloud, “I wonder what other thing she might do instead of hurting them back?”

* + - Have weekly dates
  + Taking advantage of opportunities for focused time

Many opportunities pop up unexpectedly. Be prepared to respond.

* **Create a positive context for relating**
  + Five positive observations for every negative observation
    - Learn the discipline of delight (what’s good rather than what’s irritating)
    - Practice ‘flipping’ the negative aspects of their positive traits.

The unstable kid is often the exciting fun loving kid

The impatient child is often the accomplishing child

The emotionally flat one is often the stable observer

The careless one is often the optimist

The pessimist is often the careful analyst

* + - Making unflattering comparisons with yourself or others is toxic.
  + Regular date times
  + Regular fun/relaxing times
  + Instead of nagging – 2 choices; they decide the outcome
  + Let your “yes” be “yes”; your “no” be “no” and consider “maybe”.
* **Lean on your strengths; weaken your weaknesses**

Like your child, you have positive character qualities that are coupled with negative features.

Where you are weak, consider how to diminish them by recruiting others for help.

For example, if you tend to observe, analyze, describe (all good qualities), you may tend to be weak in activism, accomplishing or being fun loving.

You can learn to lean against your weaknesses and recruit/respond to help from others.

**LISTENING**

If they start to tell you a story or ask a question[[2]](#footnote-2) RSVP

* **Turning toward them**

Face them, make eye contact, get on their level, lean forward, put down the distraction and listen.

Be patient. Let them finish, even if they are rambling.

Ask questions that encourage them to say more.

“What else did he say?” “What did he do next?”

“What did you do/say?” “What did you feel/think/want”

Reflect back

When they are telling of a struggle, rephrase and repeat what you heard. “It sounds like you’re saying that you feel I’m being unfair by not letting you go to the concert on a school night. Is that it?” [[3]](#footnote-3)

Validate

If you’ve listened empathetically, you probably understand why they feel or think or want what they do. Say so. (e.g. “It makes sense that you would feel that way; think that; want that”).

Validation is not agreement that what they feel/think/want/did is legitimate. It is simply acknowledging that it makes sense to you.

One problem with validation is that the parent may then be inclined to agree with or go along with them. Your “yes” must still remain “yes” and your “no” remain “no”.

I can let my son know that I understand why he wants the latest release of a video game without getting it for him.

I may want him to learn to delay gratification; I may have legitimate concerns about the long term effects of gaming; I may want him to earn, rather than be handed a desired object. He may not empathize with my reasons but I can empathize with his and still remain true to my convictions.

**Vs. turning away** (silence, stonewalling or changing the subject)

Don’t change the subject.

Don’t walk away.

Don’t start doing something else (e.g. functioning, looking at your watch/phone/clock while they are talking.

Make some sounds & use body language that communicates listening (e.g. “I see,” “Really,” “Hmmm”, ’Huh” or “Uh-huh”)

**Vs. turning against** (criticism, contempt, defensiveness or instructing)

Don’t complete their sentences or correct their grammar.

Avoid asking “why?” as it can sound like, “how could you?” or encourage self-justification

Don’t jump to conclusions.

Avoid telling them not to feel/act a certain way. (“Don’t worry about it.” Don’t cry.”)

*Handout*

* **Finding your way to their inner life** (age appropriate)
  + Appropriate modeling
    - Your child needs to hear about your inner life without having to bear an adult load
    - Showing your real self

Ask their opinion about something that happened to you (age appropriate)

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| --- | --- |
| **The real self** | **The protected self** |
| See/Hear/Experience | Conclusions about why. |
| Feelings | Blaming others for causing the feelings |
| Thoughts | Regarding thoughts as, ”the way it is” |
| Wants | Entitled to what they want. |
| Deeds | Justifying what they did |

* + Finding your way from their protected self to the real self

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The real self** | **The protected self** | **Finding your way to the real** |
| See/Hear/Experience | Conclusions about why. | Don’t bite on/argue about the conclusion. Ask, “What happened that you decided it was because of ....?” |
| Feelings | Blaming others for causing the feelings | Don’t bit on the blame/argue about it. Ask, “What happened that you feel this way?” |
| Thoughts | Regarding thoughts as, ”the way it is” | Don’t argue back; Note: the backfire effect; to avoid strengthening false thoughts ask them to help you understand them. As they talk they will often realize there are limits to their own understanding. |
| Wants | Entitled to what they want. | Treat it like a request; reflect back what you’re hearing; validate; consider it, noting the problem of empathetic caving (reinforcing entitlement; not teaching them to delay gratification) vs. the problem of not letting them influence you (learned helplessness; sneakiness; etc.) |
| Deeds | Justifying what they did | Don’t argue about the justification; ask more questions about what they did; what they were thinking – feeling – wanting – what triggered it. |

**A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT TEENS**

* **Priming the pump**

When we ask teens questions they often give monosyllabic answers.

Part of this has to do with asking closed ended questions (e.g. “Did you like it?”).

Part of this has to do with asking questions that feel too tedious to answer (e.g. “So, how was your day?”).

But, and this is what this point is addressing, sometimes questions feel like an inquisition to a teen.

Did you ever watch teens interacting? Everybody talks at the same time or somebody tells a story that triggers everyone else to talk.

Try this when you’re in the car. Say, “I had something funny/weird/interesting, etc. happen today.”...then tell the story. They will often start telling some story of their own. You could add at the end of your story, “Has this ever happened to you?”

Or, as mentioned earlier, tell them about something that happened and then ask them what they would feel/think/do if they were you.

BTW if you’re a talkative person don’t forget to listen when they start talking.

* **Teenage brains**
  + - If you’re going to say something to a teen OR ask them something, plan on keeping it short. The part of their brain involved in concentration does not function until their early to mid-twenties.
    - The average level of teen anxiety today is equivalent to the highest level of anxiety 30 years ago.
    - Learn to forebear with erratic emotions and crazy interpretations of your emotions.

Teenage brains are not fully functional and the parts that do function give them inaccurate readings on themselves and the larger world. They are, neurologically, not very self-aware.

Because the prefrontal area is not dominant, the more mature emotional regions (limbic system) take over in emotional situations.

So, in rational situations a teen can seem very mature and yet show a complete lack of rationality in an emotionally charged or peer pressured situation.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/>

<http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jayne_blakemore_the_mysterious_workings_of_the_adolescent_brain?language=en#t-16952>

* + - If you start feeling ‘flooded’ with your own emotions tell them you need a break to cool down. Get back with them later.
* **Mentors**

Mentors are an important transition relationship for teens. They can provide a venue for the teen to be open & honest with someone other than the parent that they’re trying to separate from.

Some parents are reluctant to encourage their teens to find mentors because they are reluctant to release them into the care of others but mentors can be a critically important influence and should be encouraged.

Other parents are more than happy to pass the mess that is a teenager to a mentor but you need to keep initiating with & responding to them even if they have a great mentor.

Talk with your child’s mentor from time to time (don’t overwhelm them with too much information or negative emotions).

1. On the one hand, the child must learn that they are not the center of the universe for their own emotional health. Part of their learning is that they have to share you with the rest of the world. You do need time to function, relate to others, rest & recreate. On the other hand, parents can become so distracted they miss opportunities to really connect with their child. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We sometimes answer questions when it might be better to say, “That’s an interesting question, what got you thinking about that?” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Younger children may need to have us reflect back emotions we’re observing. “This is frustrating isn’t it? “You seem sad, does this make you sad” Be careful though, because drawing the wrong conclusion is going to be frustrating for them or they may agree with your conclusions for reasons of their own. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)