

## Tips on Listening to Your Child

[<http://life.familyeducation.com/parenting/communication/45281.html>]

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### Why you should work on your listening skills

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Listening—it's not as easy as it sounds. It's often uncomfortable to really *hear* somebody else's point of view (especially if it's your child and she's right and you happen to be wrong. It could happen, you know!). You might hear something you don't want to hear. It's uncomfortable to be challenged. You might hear something that challenges your belief system, or makes you question your assumptions about life. You might hear something that will make you want to *change*. Listen up now, here are some reasons to work on your listening skills:

- Listening carefully is how you gather information about what's going on in your child's life and head.
- Listening effectively builds strong relationships.
- Listening thoughtfully shows respect.
- Listening is always the first step in solving problems.
- Listening to your child's perspective will teach you a lot. Kids are smarter than most grown-ups think, and they generally know what they need. Listen to your kids, and they will teach you how to raise them.
- If you want your child to listen to you, you'll need to first listen to her. A child who is listened to learns how to listen. And until she learns how to listen to you, it's the same as telling your problems to the bathroom mirror—no matter how eloquently you express yourself, nobody will be hearing you but you.

*It's a Good Idea!*

There's only one rule for being a good talker: Learn to listen.

Here are the keys to improve your listening skills:

- Listen first.
- Always listen.
- Create a special time and place for listening.
- Use active listening.

*It's a Good Idea!*

A greedy communicator “takes” from instead of “talks,” or adds to a conversation. The main difference between taking and talking is one little *l*. That *l* stands for “listening.” To talk with somebody, you've gotta listen.



## Listen First

Listen first, and listen well, before reacting. The true story may take a while to emerge, the real feelings may take time. Okay, hotheads, this one will be a challenge for you! Can you count to 10? Practice!

## Always Listen

I know, you've got a million things, people, and animals to focus on. And I'm telling you to always be aware of listening opportunities? Alas, yes. Kids aren't always organized, and kids with emotions (and last time I checked that was all of them) are even less so. It's hard for a child to wait until an opportune time to raise an important issue or disclose some vital information about how she got sent to the principal's office or that Toby beat him up because he accidentally shoved him into the garbage can. Sometimes a child will fret over telling you something important—and let it slip out just at the moment you are least expecting it. Perhaps you're on your way out the door to a board meeting, or making a left-hand turn into the most dangerous intersection in town, or checking that the soufflé hasn't fallen. Trust me, when you're least prepared is when the most vital information will slip from your child's little lips like a sigh.

Carpe diem—seize the day! Keep a constant low-level awareness, a sense of priorities. If Bobby is in hysterics or Sally is desperate to tell you about her date, perhaps you *can* rearrange your morning (and your life) and listen. (Can you call in sick? Cancel the carpet cleaner? Get somebody else to pick up for the carpool? It's important!)

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## Create a special place or time for listening

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And sometimes you can't rearrange things. You're not superhuman, you know, and sometimes listening—which does take time and requires full attention—will just have to wait. If you need to delay the listening:

- Acknowledge the child's need to be heard. Stop for 5 seconds, 10 seconds, a minute and look your child in the eyes. “This is not a good time, Paula. Let's talk about it later.” (It helps to name the “it” you're planning on talking about specifically so the child really feels heard, acknowledged, and seen.)
- Make an appointment. Any child over three will be able to understand the concept (even though the younger ones' senses of time aren't very good yet). “Paula, may I make an appointment with you to talk about this after lunch? We'll sit on the porch. Okay?”

### *It's a Good Idea!*

If you already have established special time with your child you *might* use that time to listen to your child. But remember that not all truths or confidences require a big listen. Some announcements, important truths, and confidences need a response of silence, or need time to sit and breathe.



- Follow through. It's up to *you* to remember, and it's vital that you appear at the established time and place, ready to listen. Don't be a flake—kids hate that. Why should they trust and respect a flake?

### Active Listening: Your First Line of Defense

Here's a tool that works especially well when you feel stalemated or frustrated with a conversation. You can actively listen anywhere, as long as you pay full attention and do it deliberately. You can do it by first announcing you'll do it, or you can do it without drawing attention to the technique. Either way is effective.

### Here's your three-step active listening formula:

- *Focus your attention.* Have the child talk to you. Listen to the child's thoughts and feelings until he is finished.
- *Paraphrase the thoughts and feelings you heard back to him without interpretation.* That means simply repeating back what he said and what you heard. "You say you hit Angela because she's an ugly girl. You were angry with her. Did I get that right?"
- *Allow the child to correct what you've said.* "No, I meant that I hit her after she said I was ugly, and I said she was ugly, and she made me cry. Why did she say that, Dad?" (See, the conversation has opened up already!)

### What are the direct results of active listening?

- *Active listening helps the child explore his own feelings and thoughts on a deeper level.* Sometimes feelings are so complex or overwhelming that a child may not know *how* he feels, especially if he's very upset at the time. Active listening can help you help him figure it out.
- *Active listening raises a child's senses of self-worth and self-respect.* You are listening to him, you are respecting his feelings and ideas, you are taking the time to find out what really matters to him. Getting respect increases his self-respect, and not just a little bit, either! Paying attention and listening well are the things that matter *most* to a child!

#### Words to Parent By:

*Active listening* means trying to understand the child's thoughts *and* feelings by listening silently and then paraphrasing—saying back again as closely as possible *without interpretation*—what has been said.



- *Active listening helps build your sense of empathy.* When you've truly heard the child's ideas, thoughts, and concerns, you'll be able to feel what he is feeling.
- *Active listening gives your kid the opportunity to correct you.* After you paraphrase, he can tell where you've misheard, and correct your misunderstandings. By hearing his words reflected back at him, he can clarify *to himself* what he means.

**Beware: Evils lurk in the house of active listening. Don't open these doors:**

- *Watch that you hear what is being said,* not what you *expect* to hear, and not what you *want* to hear. Expectations and desires can be seductive and dangerous.
- *Watch that you aren't focusing on the method of delivery.* It's not *how* it's being said, but *what's* being said. Ignore the swear words, the finger in the nose, the mumbling, and the slouched posture, unless they are part of what is being communicated.
- *Listen with more than your ears.* Nonverbal signals are important, too, and meaning is transmitted through *all* of our senses.
- *Don't be too literal.* Some kids exaggerate, some use slang. Listen for the message.
- *Be careful not to let your feelings about what is being said interfere with your listening.* Kids know just how to bug their parents, and they'll try to, at any given opportunity.
- *Be careful not to let your beliefs and attitudes interfere with your listening.* Even if you are hearing things that totally offend your moral values, complete the exercise. You can process, judge, and respond later—your job here is to gather information and understand what the child is saying. Let your own ideas go, just for a moment! Stop, take a deep breath, concentrate, and just listen. Listen to the child's perceptions. You need to *hear* to understand.
- *Don't ignore the emotion.* If you're listening only for the facts, you'll likely miss some important information. When you paraphrase, include how you think the child is feeling (and let him correct you if you are wrong). How the child feels about what he's telling you may be just as important as what he's saying.

