

How Can Parents Model Good Listening Skills?

by Carl Smith

Listen Better, Learn More

In one of the Family Circus cartoon strips, the little girl looks up at her father, who is reading the newspaper, and says: "Daddy, you have to listen to me with your eyes as well as your ears." That statement says almost all there is to say about listening, whether in our personal conversations or in learning in school.

Do Listening Skills Affect Learning?

Listening is not a school subject like reading and writing. Many of us seem to feel it comes naturally and that as long as we can listen to directions on how to find the restroom, nothing more needs to be said. The latest studies reveal that listening is a very large part of school learning and is one of our primary means of interacting with other people on a personal basis. It is estimated that between 50 and 75 percent of students' classroom time is spent listening to the teacher, to other students, or to audio media.

Can Parents Guide Their Children To Better Listening?

According to research on listening skills, being a good listener means focusing attention on the message and reviewing the important information. Parents can model good listening behavior for their children and advise them on ways to listen as an active learner, pick out highlights of a conversation, and ask relevant questions. Sometimes it helps to "show" children that an active listener is one who looks the speaker in the eye and is willing to turn the television off to make sure that the listener is not distracted by outside interference.

Guidelines For Modeling Good Listening Skills

- **Be interested and attentive.** Children can tell whether they have a parent's interest and attention by the way the parent replies or does not reply. Forget about the telephone and other distractions. Maintain eye contact to show that you really are with the child.
 - **Encourage talking.** Some children need an invitation to start talking. You might begin with, "Tell me about your day at school." Children are more likely to share their ideas and feelings when others think them important.
 - **Listen patiently.** People think faster than they speak. With limited vocabulary and experience in talking, children often take longer than adults to find the right word. Listen as though you have plenty of time.
 - **Hear children out.** Avoid cutting children off before they have finished speaking. It is easy to form an opinion or reject children's views before they finish what they have to say. It may be difficult to listen respectfully and not correct misconceptions, but respect their right to have and express their opinions.
 - **Listen to nonverbal messages.** Many messages children send are communicated nonverbally by their tone of voice, their facial expressions, their energy level, their posture, or changes in their behavior patterns. You can often tell more from the way a child says something than from what is said. When a child comes in obviously upset, be sure to find a quiet time then or sometime that day to help explore those feelings.
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Suggestions For Improving Communication With Children

- **Be interested.** Ask about children's ideas and opinions regularly. If you show your children that you are really interested in what they think, what they feel, and what their opinions are, they will become comfortable about expressing their thoughts to you.
- **Avoid dead-end questions.** Ask children the kinds of questions that will extend interaction rather than cut it off. Questions that require a yes or no or right answer lead a conversation to a dead end. Questions that ask children to describe, explain, or share ideas extend the conversation.
- **Extend conversation.** Try to pick up a piece of your child's conversation. Respond to his or her statements by asking a question that restates or uses some of the same words your child used. When you use children's own phrasing or terms, you strengthen their confidence in their conversational and verbal skills and reassure them that their ideas are being listened to and valued.
- **Share your thoughts.** Share what you are thinking with your child. For instance, if you are puzzling over how to rearrange your furniture, get your child involved with questions such as, "I'm not sure where to put this shelf. Where do you think would be a good place?"
- **Observe signs.** Watch the child for signs that it is time to end a conversation. When a child begins to stare into space, give silly responses, or ask you to repeat several of your comments, it is probably time to stop the exchange.
- **Reflect feelings.** One of the most important skills good listeners have is the ability to put themselves in the shoes of others or empathize with the speaker by attempting to understand his or her thoughts and feelings. As a parent, try to mirror your children's feelings by repeating them. You might reflect a child's feelings by commenting, "It sounds as if you're angry at your math teacher." Restating or rephrasing what children have said is useful when they are experiencing powerful emotions that they may not be fully aware of.
- **Help clarify and relate experiences.** As you listen, try to make your child's feelings clear by stating them in your own words. Your wider vocabulary can help children express themselves as accurately and clearly as possible and give them a deeper understanding of words and inner thoughts.

Source

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Why Are Parents Important In Building Children's Communication Skills?

Parents play an essential role in building children's communication skills because children spend more time with their parents than with any other adult. Children also have a deeper involvement with their parents than with any other adult, and the family as a unit has lifelong contact with its members. Parents control many of the contacts a child has with society as well as society's contacts with the child. Adults, parents, and teachers set a powerful example of good or poor communication. Communication skills are influenced by the examples children see and hear. Parents and teachers who listen to their children with interest, attention, and patience set a good example. The greatest audience children can have is an adult who is important to them and interested in them.

Sources

Most of the following references--those identified with an ED or EJ number--have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. The journal articles should be available at most research libraries. For a list of ERIC collections in your area, contact ACCESS ERIC at 1-800-LET- ERIC.

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