

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Teaching Children How to Listen—by Example

DID ANYONE EVER TEACH YOU to listen with full concentration? Four-year-old Sean pays surprisingly close attention to what others say. I asked him how he learned to do that, and he proudly replied, “My dad taught me.” Many parents wonder how to get their progeny to pay attention when they’re talking. One important way to develop children’s ability to attend to our words is to demonstrate one-pointed listening ourselves. If you’ve ever benefited from having another person show their understanding of what you have to say, you know how rare the experience can be in our busy lives. Here are some suggestions for providing role models of good listening for our children.

Answer children right away. Isn’t that what we want them to do?

Act like you have time to hear. Have you ever felt that someone was giving you an unconscious time limit on talking? You start to tell them something, but their eyes are flashing “Get to the point” or “I can’t wait for you to hear my answer.” For children, the sense of self takes root through successful attempts at self-expression. A baby babbles, and his caregiver looks in his eyes and reciprocates with same sounds. As a child gets older, she learns to value her own thoughts and feelings partially because others are

interested in them. If we show that we’re patiently interested in her perceptions of what happened with her friend, we are validating her budding abilities to tell her story.

Go beneath the words. “It sounds like you wanted to play ball but didn’t get a chance.” Listening for their intentions, feelings, and wishes helps children convey inner realms that are difficult to put into words. Helping them find words to express their emotions creates positive connections. We feel closer to people who understand us.

Listen with expressions of love. An editor’s wife once told me that she researched non-verbal ways to make a child feel loved. She learned the importance of the kind of communication we’re used to seeing in a romantic movie scene—the star listening raptly to what his co-star says, looking adoringly in her eyes, thinking about how cherished this moment is together. If we’re thinking about the laundry or e-mail we just got from work while listening, the affection we feel doesn’t shine through our expressions.

Write down what they say. In our literate society, having our words written down can make us feel like we are taken seriously. This process can be even more empowering for children. A young child who is upset about missing a parent is often soothed when a teacher writes “I miss you” in a note. Recently, I asked an upset child if he wanted me to write down his feelings. He immediately acquiesced and dictated, “I want my binky.”

Learning to listen well is a vital life skill, and exploring ways to do it better can only enhance our relationships.

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