

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Teaching Children How to Listen

FOUR-YEAR-OLD SEAN pays surprisingly close attention to what others say. I asked him how he learned to listen so well, and he proudly replied, “My dad taught me.” I wonder if Sean’s father consciously helped him develop his abilities to focus so fully and tune out distractions.

In our noisy, fast-paced world, it’s challenging for children to learn how to concentrate on what someone else is saying. Look around you at all the examples of distracted, half-hearted listening that children observe—parents talking while they do e-mail, teenagers texting during dinner time. If we want our children to be able to really digest what someone else is saying, we need to cultivate their abilities to consciously focus on what’s being said, because listening skills don’t develop automatically. It is a cognitive skill based on learned behaviors and rewards.

Understand what listening involves. Dogs can hear better than people; but hearing is not the same as listening. We need to capture a child’s attention before talking, by getting on her level physically and looking in her eyes and even announcing that you want to tell her something.

Turn off the technology. Children’s auditory systems are not fully mature until they are about 15. That means in order to hear and absorb what he is being told, a young child needs less background noise than an adult. “I want to talk to you now, so I’m going to shut off the TV.” “Let’s turn off the car radio so we can really hear each other.”

Stop talking too much. Repeating, lecturing, cajoling, telling children how they should feel are all ways of getting them to tune us out because what we’re saying sounds like static. Try saying one word, like “milk” meaning “The milk has to be put back in the refrigerator.” Children often listen better to instructions that are sung: “It’s time to clear the table, the table, the table.”

Observe good listening and praise it. Compliment your child for giving you his attention, for following through on what you say, for repeating back your words in order to clarify them. We want to convince children that they already are excellent listeners. Let your child overhear you telling others how well he listens, rather than the opposite. In addition, point out other examples of full-focus listening when you see it in someone else or notice it on a TV program.

Play listening games. Who can hear the rain drops? Can you put the glass on the table without making a sound? Can you hear me when I stand far away from you or when I whisper?

Do you reflect on the quality of listening in your environment? The first step in teaching children to pay attention to what others say is becoming unusually good listeners ourselves.

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