

## **12 Ways to Listen to Your Child and Teen**

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*Adapted from their new book, "Parenting in Your Own Voice"*

Learning how to really listen to our children is a gesture of love and a commitment to their future well-being; its importance cannot be overstated. The resulting self-confidence, self-acceptance, and sense of competence our children develop will influence the quality of their entire life.

When your child talks and your response reflects that you are present, open, and committed to understanding, you show him you are listening and interested. Being heard in this way communicates value and appreciation, and that builds his self-esteem. It tells your child in an important way that you see him and want to know who he is.

But even with our awareness and intention to listen, the many intrusions and distractions in our busy lives continue to challenge our ability to do so. For example, you know you are not truly listening when you find yourself: anticipating what they will say next, completing their sentences, checking your smartphone while your child is talking to you, or feeling impatient.

Listening is a skill that doesn't come naturally to people in current times. Today, with instant messaging, fast-paced editing on TV and in movies, and the ever-present allure and interruption of our tech toys and tools, our brains are used to collecting quick impressions and then moving on.

As parents, we have to relearn how to quiet our busy minds and eliminate distractions so we can practice listening to our children. No one can be a good listener all the time, so here are a dozen strategies to help you get better at it.

### **Take advantage of chatty moments.**

Children tend to open up in certain settings more than others. For example, in the car and before bed. These are great opportunities to ask questions and listen to their answers.

### **Create sharing rituals.**

Kids love routines and rituals. When your child comes home from school, and before you tell him to do his homework or practice the piano, pour a cup of cocoa and ask him about his day.

### **Walk and talk.**

In our parents' and grandparents' times, families would take Sunday morning strolls together, or walk after supper. Try this with your kids and notice what's on their minds. Walking the dog together is a good way to do it too.

**Converse at mealtime.**

The dinner table is a place where family members can regularly practice listening to one another, modeled of course, by parents.

**Share an experience.**

After watching a movie or attending a party, for example, ask your child what she observed and about the feelings and reactions you both had. Listen and learn about one another.

**Avoid correcting.**

When your child is telling you about his day or an event, avoid correcting his grammar or word usage. Listen to what he is saying rather than *how* he is saying it, and wait until later to teach proper English.

**Clarify, don't drill.**

Any time your child communicates to you, ask questions for clarity, but resist the temptation to drill for details. This is especially important when tweens and teens are disclosing personal information.

**Don't interrupt.**

Try to become aware of moments when your child is talking, and you interrupt with a thought, question, or piece of advice. Letting her finish her thought encourages more communication.

**Create conversation.**

If your child isn't talkative, instead of asking lots of questions, tell him something about your day and listen to his response. Alternatively, present a situation that has happened to you and ask for his ideas about ways to handle it.

**Reflect back.**

Communicate back to your child what you heard her say, especially when she's telling you something that's troubling her. This insures that you understand her, and it conveys your interest in getting it right.

**Accept the child's reaction.**

If your child is annoyed at something you missed or misunderstood, accept his reaction and understand that it comes from a strong desire for you to hear him and know him. This is a tribute to your parenting. Accept his corrections without getting defensive.

**Admit your mistakes.**

We've all done it--spaced out when our child was trying to tell us something, and then replied, "Uh huh." When you realize you weren't listening, fess up. Explain that you were distracted, and then make a time to talk when you aren't.

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