

# HOW TO ~~TALK~~ LISTEN TO YOUR CHILD

Many parents ask me how they should talk to make their kids listen to them. I tell them the most important thing parents can learn is how to really listen to their kids. If we do not listen to our kids, they will not listen to us. Listening is a skill that can be developed. It is a skill that you may not have observed in your parents when you were a child. Did your parents listen to you as a child, or did you grow up understanding that “children are to be seen and not heard”?

One of my favorite quotes is, “A joy not shared is cut in half, and a sorrow not shared is doubled.” If you win a tournament, or an honor or a promotion at work but have no one to share it with, the victory may seem hollow. If you are suffering in pain or disappointment, or become frustrated about a relationship and have no one to share it with, the pain increases.

How sad I felt in a counseling session when a 17-year-old boy told his parents that he had decided not to share his joys or his sorrows with his parents. Fortunately, this family is working on these issues, and hopefully by the time he leaves home he will be able to share his joys and his sor-

rows with his parents. What drove this youngster to feel uncomfortable sharing his feelings, thoughts and ideas with his parents?

## ACCEPT FEELINGS

There are many ways that parents unintentionally inhibit their kids from sharing. One of the most common is a parent’s inability to accept the child’s feelings. A child says that she is afraid of the dark and the parent responds, “You don’t need to be afraid of



the dark—our house is safe.” A child says, “You love my brother more than me,” and the parent responds, “No we don’t, we love you both the same.” In both situa-

tions the parent has not accepted the child’s feelings. It’s better to say things like, “I know that the house can seem scary at night,” or “Boy, I bet that really makes you feel sad to feel we love your brother more than you.” Statements like these are sympathetic responses to kids’ feelings, responses that validate and affirm their feelings.

Next, gently try to discover what has led to those feelings, and follow up with some reassuring statements. It’s important to accept feelings even if the logic the child has used to arrive at those feelings is not sound. Feelings themselves are neither right nor wrong, they are just there.

## HOLD THE ADVICE

If a child shares feelings or ideas and automatically receives advice instead of attentive listening, communication will be shut down. Listen carefully, praise the ideas, and ask if your child wants suggestions before offering advice or solutions.

Always telling your son or daughter a better way to do something will not encourage sharing. Saying, “I like the *B* you got on your report card, but if you’d try

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harder you could get an A," will inhibit a kid that might have wanted to express his or her own feelings of disappointment and frustration.

Being critical and sarcastic is another way to stifle communication. A young man in counseling who had to use a crutch due to arthritis in his hip expressed anger to his father for making fun of his limp. Sarcasm is a trait many parents have learned from

their parents and may even accept as normal.

Simply not being available will also make it difficult for your child to express him- or herself. Kids typically won't share things if you march into their rooms and say, "Share with me," but they will usually express themselves more readily if you are taking them out to dinner, or to a ball game, or shopping.

## **IT'S NEVER TOO LATE**

Many parents feel guilty that they haven't responded appropriately in the past to their kids' feelings and ideas, but don't let that stop you from changing your ways. Discuss your shortcomings with your child and commit to becoming a better listener. Don't let guilt keep you from doing what's right; and it's never too late to do what's right.

### **A CHALLENGE TO YOU:**

1. During your childhood, did your parents really listen to you? If not, what did they do that kept you from sharing with them?
2. Think about a recent time your child shared his or her feelings and you did not really accept them. Try to discuss those feelings with him or her now.