

Finding the time to listen closely to your children

By Marc Rosenbaum

Has your child ever said, “Ma (or dad) you’re not really listening to me?” In those moments, if you are willing to take an objective look, you would most likely see that they were right and that you weren’t really listening. The key word here is “really.”

I define really listening as being totally focused on what the other person is saying, which is very different from being preoccupied with what we are thinking as they are speaking. I know this is no easy task. But for that matter parenting is an incredibly difficult and challenging undertaking. I also know, from my own experience, as well as from helping hundreds of parents who have participated in our programs, that you deeply care about your child’s welfare. This is why I am asking you to go to another level with regard to how you relate to others, especially your children.

This is what a mother shared after doing one of our listening exercises: “In the past, I usually didn’t pay much attention to what my eight-year-old daughter had to say. Instead, I would usually be thinking about what I had to get done. ... She told me she felt that I didn’t love her as much as I loved her younger sister. I never realized she felt this and ... I was able to tell her that I loved her just as much as I love her sister. I learned that people open up when we give them the space to open up.”

This happened because she was able to totally focus her attention on what her daughter was saying rather than being distracted by her thoughts. I realize how difficult it is to really listen to your children 24/7. My hope is that you will be able to start by taking one conversation a day with your child and observe what you do instead of really listening. It is helpful to write down your observations after your conversation.

Rather than listening when a child is talking about a problem, parents are often preoccupied with finding a solution. I am suggesting that you pay attention to what your child is saying, and don’t even start thinking about a solution until they stop talking. When you are thinking about a solution while your child is speaking, you are missing a lot of the information that may assist you in making a more appropriate and helpful response. Besides, in most cases your child isn’t even looking for a solution. Just like most adults, children are looking for a compassionate ear when they share a problem or concern.

Many of us are preoccupied with “doing” rather than really listening. This includes doing the dishes, watching television or having a phone conversation while our child is speaking to us. In situations where your attention is split, it is appropriate to tell your child, “I want to listen to 100% of what you have to say but I can’t do that right this minute. Can we talk in about ten minutes or after I’m finished?”

Research has shown that every thought we have sends electrical impulses to a part of the brain that translates the emotional content of these thoughts into physical feelings of relaxation or tension. Through this mechanism our thoughts significantly influence every cell in our bodies. Scientists have also measured that more than 70% of what we think does not benefit us. Most of our thoughts are repetitive, dwelling on past occurrences or future concerns, and prevent us from experiencing the present moment.

If you want to know what living in the present moment looks like, observe a young child at play. They are totally consumed with exploring the world rather than being distracted by past or future concerns. Or watch a child go from laughing to crying and back to laughing in a matter of seconds. They are so beautiful and vital because they are totally present to life. I am asking you to experience the present moment with your child by really listening to what they have to say, rather than being distracted by your own mental chatter.

We take in so much more verbal as well as emotional content when we really listen. This allows us to respond to our child's needs in a more appropriate, insightful and helpful way. But more important the moment we give our full attention, we are connected to our child at a much deeper level. It's as if we are giving them a big hug. They know it, they feel it, and it's the level of attention that they crave and deserve. In many cases, acting out and misbehavior are our child's response to not getting this deep level of attention.

I realize that some of you are probably saying to yourselves, "I don't have time to really listen." In my experience, it is time well spent. Just maybe this is the quality of interaction that your child is looking for ... And maybe your child will be less demanding if you give them this level of attention And maybe, just maybe, your child will listen to you if you demonstrate what real listening looks like.

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