



by Karen Stephens

Parenting Requires Attentive, Consistent Listening Skills

I was at the stove stirring a pot of noodles. While I cooked, a five-year-old stood nearby, enthusiastically going on about her day.

As she talked, I attended to her bubbling as well as the pot's. I'd nod, "hmm," or say "Oh, really" at the appropriate places. Or so I thought.

Then out of nowhere came an accusation that really surprised me: "Karen, you aren't even listening ..."

My heart sank; I could hear her disappointment in me. My defense was weak: "Of course I'm listening, honey. I'm standing right here. Now go on, I'm all ears."

"No you aren't. You're not even *loooooo*king at me." Her voice sounded so disheartened; even a bit betrayed.

But yes, she was technically correct. I had my eye on the pot and the timer; less on the little girl who wanted — needed — my attention.

Fact is, she caught me red-handed. I was multi-tasking; I wasn't being very attentive. I made minimal replies; it was mostly a one-sided conversation.

I wasn't *loooooo*king at her. And so, for her, a critical part of true engagement was missing: my eye contact, facial expressions, and the other ways that polite, caring people show interest.

As my young friend taught me, multi-tasking might be efficient, but too much of it communicates unintended messages to children. If we don't truly listen to what children have to say, they can end up feeling ignored, unimportant, and unworthy. Those aren't messages any parent wants to send their child. If we only superficially listen to children, the strength of the parent-child relationship weakens.

Listening well to children requires time — and even practice. But it's a gift that blesses children immeasurably. Following are tips for honing your listening skills:

- Engage in a mutually satisfying conversation with each of your children daily. Make it as priority and schedule it. Conversations with your child shouldn't be just as important as work meetings; they are more important. Some parents set aside time to "de-brief" with children before supper; others save it for breakfast or bedtime. Timing isn't crucial; parents regularly making time to listen is.
- Create opportunities for undistracted conversation. Walks around the block, commuting in the car with the radio off, or having a meal together with the TV and phone(s) off allows you to focus on listening and responding meaningfully. Think of other ways that fit your family's lifestyle, such as talking during shared daily chores like emptying a dishwasher or making beds.

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- Listening to young children is often best done by engaging in play with them. Play scenarios and responding to their comments and viewpoints during play is a very effective way to communicate about issues preschoolers don't openly bring up in conversation.
- Be honest when you're too busy to focus on conversation. It's better to be honest than to try to trick children with "fake" listening. If you're too busy to talk when your child initiates it, agree to a time when you can fully listen.

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- Talk "with" children, rather than "at" them. Don't jump in too quickly if your child pauses to organize comments. Don't mentally anticipate your reply or you'll miss what your child is actually saying. And resist the urge to tell children what you "think" they are trying to say. Be patient and give them time to express themselves. They need the practice.
- Stay on the topic your child selects, even if you're uncomfortable with it. Resist changing the topic or ending the conversation. It can be painful to hear a child is being teased at school. But avoiding that tough issue denies children the chance to ask for your supportive hug or problem solving help.
- Provide non-verbal cues that invite your child to elaborate. Sitting down, leaning forward, making eye contact, tilting your head, and making pleasant facial expressions all signal your willingness to listen and communicate.
- Avoid non-verbal cues that discourage dialogue, such as: crossing arms defensively across chest, clenching teeth or fists, turning your back, glaring or avoiding eye contact completely.
- Extend empathy by being sensitive to children's perspective and point of view. Earn your child's trust by not belittling his/her feelings or thoughts. Convey understanding, such as saying, "It can be hard being the youngest in the family. I bet sometimes you feel like you're always being bossed around."
- Even young children value privacy and confidentiality. If your child shares being afraid or worried about something, ask if it's okay for you to share it before you make it the topic of family conversation. If child care or school is involved, ask your child's permission before you discuss the topic with their teacher.
- Ask open-ended questions that encourage children to clarify and elaborate on their thoughts or feelings. For instance, if a child mentions he feels lonely at preschool, gently ask what things he's done to try to make friends. Ask questions that would help guide the problem solving process.
- Avoid lecturing, ranting, or preaching to children. Listening means *you* don't do all the talking. Phrases like, "I told you so," or "What did you expect?" rarely encourage children to seek you out as a listening ear.
- Be patient as children try to communicate. Avoid interrupting children, especially if they express feelings you don't want to hear. Truly listening means hearing children out as long as they speak respectfully. If talking with your assertive, independent child gets too tough, let your child know it's hard for you to hear. If you need a "talk break" for composure, ask for it. But don't close the door permanently. Keep listening.

Children who feel chronically "unheard" will turn to others who do show an interest in them, whether that interest is safe and wholesome or not. Make it a priority to tune into your child so they don't tune you out.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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