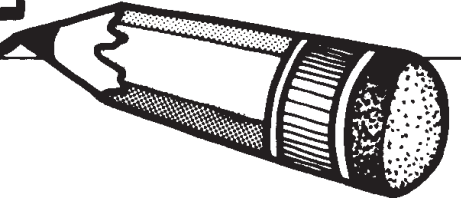


Parenting Pipeline



A newsletter for parents of fourth-grade children
from the North Dakota State University Extension Service



Listen to Me!

Communication between parents and children is not always easy. Parents say their children just don't listen to them. Children complain their parents don't listen to them. Good listening skills are a family matter. Make sure everyone's needs and wishes are acknowledged and dealt with. The key is to use communication which includes both the parent and the child learning how to listen and talk together.

Reacting vs. Responding

Many people react and fail to respond. Reacting means judging the situation based on your own feelings and experiences. Responding means making an effort to hear the *other* person's feelings regarding the situation. Responding means sensing the emotion behind another's words and allowing the other person to tell his story without feeling it is being judged.

Reacting (negative feedback)

John comes home and throws his math book on the table as he says, "I hate math. I'll never be able to do division!"

The parent responds by saying, "Oh yes you will. Just keep trying." or "Now it can't be that bad." or "I was always good in math and you will be too. You're just not trying hard enough." or "You shouldn't hate math. It's important."

These reacting messages frustrate children. They leave children feeling as though nobody cares or understands. Parents mean well as they try to convey their messages, but their messages often go unheard if they are unable to really listen to the child's point of view.

Responding (positive feedback)

John comes home and throws his math book on the table as he says, "I hate math. I'll never be able to do division!"

The parent responds by saying, "Boy, you sound angry. What happened?" or "Division can be frustrating to learn. Tell me about your day."

These responses reflect the feeling behind the child's words. This invites the child to continue explaining his story and lets him know you will listen. If he continues to speak of how he hates it, you may want to suggest he take a break from it and wait until he has calmed down before doing more of his assignment.

Most children simply need to air their feelings and vent their frustrations. When they have finished you will be able to find a direction to follow, such as, "I'd be happy to look over your division problems with you," or "Would you like to see about some extra help from your teacher in the morning?" or "Let's make a plan together how we can reach your goal of learning division. Then we can take it one step at a time."

Continue to reflect feelings and respond positively. If you think the situation is beyond you and your child's problem-solving skills, ask the teacher or school counselor for assistance in getting over the hurdle.

How To Talk

The following techniques are taken from the book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Faber and Mazlish.

1. Listen with full attention

A parent reading the paper and saying "I'm listening" is not giving full attention to the child. It is much easier for a child to tell his troubles if a parent looks at him, listens carefully and is not distracted by TV, the newspaper or other family interruptions.

2. Acknowledge with a word

It's difficult for a child to think clearly when the parent is questioning, blaming or advising her. Words or phrases such as "Oh," "Umm," "I see," along with a caring attitude are invitations for a child to explore her own thoughts and feelings. As a result, she may come up with her own solutions. This allows the child to first present all of her concerns before the parent engages in problem solving.

3. Give the feeling a name

When we urge a child to push a bad feeling away, he only seems to get more upset. Parents often fear that discussing a bad feeling or experience may make things worse, but the opposite is true. The child who hears the words for what he is experiencing is comforted. This is a growing experience. Parents don't have to solve the problems for him — just give him the time, acceptance and attention he needs to grow.

4. Give a child her wishes in fantasy

When children want something they can't have, parents often respond with logical explanations of why they can't have it. But having parents understand how much something is wanted makes reality easier to bear for children.

For example if your child's friend is going to Disneyland, she may also want to go. You might try acknowledging

this desire first. Give your child in fantasy what she cannot have in reality. Try responding with, "I hear how much you want to go. It would be so much fun for our family to go along. I wish I could do magic and we'd be there right now! What would we be doing if we were there?"

After some discussion, you might want to end the conversation with, "It would be great fun to go, and it's fun to imagine the trip even though you know we can't afford it." Or, you may want to begin dreaming up a plan to save money for such a trip someday, if you believe it's appropriate. In the end, children usually understand that there are many things we would like but can't have.

Active Listening

Active listening is sensitive attention to a child's verbal and non-verbal messages, and reflecting back the child's total message with empathy.

Are you an active listener? Parents should make a visible and conscious effort to understand and care about what the child is saying. To test your ability, tape record or reflect back on interactions between you and your child. Listen carefully for four things:

1. Who does most of the talking?
2. How do you respond to your child's messages? Do you use feeling messages (responding, reflective listening, "I" messages)? Do you use feeling stoppers (judgment, reasoning, denial)?
3. Are you quietly attentive, or do you respond to your child's messages with empathy and understanding?
4. How would you feel if *your* messages were handled the way you treated your child's?

This newsletter is published for North Dakota families with fourth-graders by the NDSU Extension Service and distributed through your county extension office. See your extension agent for more parenting information and other home economics programs.