

ACTIVE LISTENING

The Royal Road to Healthy Relationship

As a communication tool, active listening is the lifeblood of healthy relationship and communication. In effective, Christ-centered parenting, active listening your child is your educated guess of what he is feeling at the moment. It is a concerted effort to focus on his words, his feelings, and his intent to share something with you.

Why Active Listen?

Consider normal, healthy family communication to be similar to your child having no fever. His temperature is 98.6 degrees. There's laughter, give and take, and cooperation. Chores are getting finished without hassle. Kids are playing nicely together. There's banter, questions, answers, direction, check-ins, and teachable moments.

Now, consider when your child has a problem. If it were a cold or the flu, his temperature would go up. He would be sniffly, sneazy, with aches and pains, nausea, maybe vomiting. His body is trying to deal with and ward off infection. His symptoms are the body's way of doing this. The higher the fever, the more infection and illness you have to treat. He needs medicine and time to heal.

When your child is in emotional or relational conflict, his words and actions tell you just how high his emotional fever is climbing. He needs soothing words of understanding, empathy, to help bring his emotional fever down. Just as you keep alert for physical symptoms of illness, so too do you need to put your radar up to catch the words and actions of your child that define emotional distress and relational conflict.

Active listening paves the royal road to relationship in Christ-centered families. Active listening leads to your child feeling heard, feeling your empathy for his conflict. It is the primary communication tool to calm conflict in the family. It precedes substantive, positive change in family interactions. It soothes the

savage beasts of defiance, rage, and disrespect. With timely application, it minimizes outbursts and precedes helping children redirect their energies in more productive ways.

Are You Involved?

Many parents (and children/teens) don't listen much at all. In conversation, one is talking and the other is preparing to talk (or rebut). You have a lot of directional conversation with your child. You ask questions and give direction. Active listening, however, is the heart of your efforts to connect with her in helping his solve problems. When you active listen well, he knows you understand. You are with him emotionally. It doesn't mean that you have answers or that the conversation leads to his problem being solved. However, effective active listening results in that "Kodak moment" when he says, "Thanks, Dad, for listening." Or "I know you really understand, Mom. That means a lot to me."

Being An Active Listener

Fundamentally, active listening is your effort to stay tuned into your child's feelings in a timely fashion. Its basic format is simple, "You feel..." However, the more creative you are in active listening, the more likely you are to get and keep your child's attention. He will only cooperate freely in addressing his concerns after he feels heard and understood. Active listening affords your child the best and fastest means of feeling heard and understood.

While the heart of active listening is simply hearing what your child is saying and responding with variations of "You feel...", the beauty of active listening is that, by your efforts, you are right when you are on the mark, and you are right when you are off the mark.

For example, you hear your child out about a peer problem at school. After his few explanatory sentences, you offer, "You feel hurt when that happens." He looks oddly at you and replies, "No, Daddy, I'm angry."

While it's clear that you missed the mark, your effort and response gave your child opportunity to clarify what he was feeling. Of course, you try to hit the mark frequently, and he beams at you because "you so get it."

Try beginning every response in conversation with your child with "you feel..." and see how long the talk lasts. Everybody gets bored with repetition, so vary your active listening with the following options:

PASSIVE LISTENING. Give your child your undivided, focused attention. Maintain good eye contact. Looking directly at her conveys the importance of her words to you. Lean a little forward in your chair, conveying intensity to your listening.

NON-COMMITTAL RESPONSES. This is what shrinks are famous for. When used sparingly and strategically, however, they are spacers that encourage your child to continue. Such comments as, "Uh huh," "Wow!" "Hmmm," all say nondirectively to her that you are right with her and you encourage her to continue.

ENCOURAGING DIRECTIVE RESPONSES. These are brief comments or questions that help her explore her feelings more thoroughly. For example, you might say, "Tell me more," or, "What was that like for you?"

ACTIVE LISTENING. Beyond "You feel..." your listening to your child is active when you are searching for and replaying the feelings you hear from her. Such expanded active listening would include comments like, "That must have been hard for you." "Oh, boy. What fun!!" "Did that make you feel betrayed?" or, "You sound like you were really excited."

Let's Give It A Try

For each of the items below, mark to the left of the item either PL, NCR, PT, PR, or AL, based on whether you think the item reflects passive listening, a noncommittal response, parroting, paraphrasing, or active listening.

1. What you said was, you don't get it.

2. So you might be feeling taken advantage of.
3. Oh no!
4. You want me to drive you to your friend's house.
5. I'm sorry, baby. That looks like it really hurts.
6. Uh huh.
7. What else happened?
8. You're stuck.
9. I understand you don't want to come in for dinner, however, it's dinner time.
10. Mmmm
11. It must feel so surreal to you right now.
12. So, I guess you think people don't play by the rules much, huh.
13. You don't have any money.
14. I wonder if what you are saying is only part of the story.
15. You're stuck?
16. What a mess.
17. You mean you have nothing to wear.
18. It's so sad when a boy breaks up with you.
19. You're spitting nails mad and you don't know what to do with it.
20. Leaning forward slightly in your chair, looking intently at her.
21. Stopping what you are doing to give him your undivided attention.
22. You're not sure where you want to go with this decision.
23. You need more time?
24. Oh, brother. For real? Tell me more.
25. So, you know what to do, but not how to do it.

Take Care ---A Word to the Wise

1. Don't judge, evaluate or criticize your child if your intent is to active listen. These errors invalidate him and convey the hidden message that his words are unimportant.
2. Don't provide your solutions to his problems. This error minimizes his efforts and conveys the hidden message that he is too stupid to figure out a viable solution himself.
3. When you think your child has talked out all of his feelings on the subject, it is then okay to ASK PERMISSION to share your thoughts and ideas about his dilemma. Asking permission conveys your respect for him abilities to solve his problems and also gives you opportunity to provide wise counsel. Of course, by your asking permission, be prepared for him to decline, and hold your tongue, further conveying your respect.