



# Active Listening

Active Listening is something you do when you want to let someone know you are really paying attention to what they are saying. It makes the person speaking to you feel important and cared for. Use Active Listening with your children as often as you can. It is especially helpful when they are upset and need your understanding. They will be more likely to talk to you in detail if you use Active Listening often.

## Advantages

- Lets the other person know you are listening carefully
- Increases mutual respect between family members
- Decreases your misunderstanding of what was said
- Increases the support you give your children
- Helps everyone think things through better
- It is a crucial component of Collaborative Problem Solving

## How to use:

1. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying while you orient toward them with your body and eyes.
2. Repeat in your own words what they said, or, Guess at the meaning of what they said and tell them, or, Say what you think they might be feeling.
3. Continue steps 1 and 2 after they say something else.

## Examples:

1. Child (excited): "There's a new film coming to town this weekend, and all of my friends are going to go to see it."

Parent: (repeating in own words): "So a film you think is exciting is starting soon and your friends are planning to see it. Is that right?"

(Guessing at meaning): “You’d like to see this new film on the weekend with your friends. Is that it?”

(Guessing at feelings behind the statement): “It sounds like you are really excited about this film.”

2. Child: “I’m not going back to that school? I hate all the teachers and the kids too!” (Notice how triggering this statement is. Can you put your trigger aside and just reflect back what you heard?)

Parent (guessing at the meaning and the feeling): “You sound very determined to not go back to school. Something must have happened today to upset you so badly.”

Child: “I don’t have to go if I don’t want to!”

Parenting (guessing at the feeling): I’m wondering if you’re feeling anxious about being at school, and that home is a safer place for you, and you want to make your own decisions about school. Is that what is going on for you?”

Child: “Actually, it’s not school as a whole, it’s Mrs. Thomas. She doesn’t care how anyone feels.”

Parent (guessing at the meaning): So Mrs. Thomas treated you badly?”

Child: “She read my poem aloud to the class and then said how bad it was.”

Parent: “So she read your poem in front of the class and criticised it. Boy, I wonder if that was embarrassing for you. I think I understand why you’re so upset.”

Using Active Listening helps make your child feel understood. Children will usually disclose more with you when you use it consistently. In the example above, this can lead to your helping them figure out a solution to a problem. Helping children to think things through and come up with their own solutions builds their maturity and self-confidence.

## Practice Exercises

For each of the statements children make below, write down what you would say back to them to demonstrate Active Listening. Please note, almost everyone has difficulty doing this without providing a solution, or arguing a counter-point. If you can just parrot back what you have heard your child say, GIVE YOURSELF A GOLD STAR! If you can repeat back what you heard in your own words while adding “is that right?” to the end of it, GIVE YOURSELF TWO GOLD STARS! If you also add “Tell me more”, then you get the grand prize!

In the examples below, try reflecting back either the expressed emotion (e.g., “Mom, I’m really excited about...”, or the implied emotion (e.g., child doesn’t name his/her own emotional state, so you guess), then also try reflecting the meaning, either expressed or implied, while also adding “is that what you mean?”

For each example below, I’ll write in a FAIL response that demonstrates what might be a typical parental response, but **does not** demonstrate active listening.

1. “There’s a special TV programme on tonight, but it starts at the same time as my usual bedtime.”

FAIL response: You know you can’t stay up late on a school night, but we can PVR it so you can watch it tomorrow.

2. “My teacher is having a baby, and her substitute is really mean.”

FAIL response: “Well maybe she has to be mean to keep order in the classroom. Just try to be good and she won’t get mad at you.”

3. “I always have to tidy my room. How come Jane doesn’t tidy hers?”

FAIL response: “You are much older than Jane, and I expect you to set a good example. So stop complaining and be a good role model for your little sister.”

4. “I don’t think kids my age should have to do jobs unless we get paid.”

FAIL response: “Listen here, doing your chores is one way that you make a small contribution to the smooth running of this household. If you want your screen time privileges to continue, I suggest you do your chores without complaining.”

5. “Why can’t I see that film? All the other parents are letting their children see films with that rating?”

FAIL response: “Well, I’m not everyone else’s parent now, am I?”

6. “Why do you have to keep nagging me about my homework? Why don’t you let me handle it myself?”

FAIL response: “Well, if you’d do your homework and hand it in on time, then I wouldn’t have to nag you, would I? You’ve already been docked marks, you can’t afford to lose any more!”

## **Checking In**

So, how are you doing with this so far? It is so deceptively easy, yet incredibly difficult at the same time. Why is that? I would suggest it is because 1) some statements from our children trigger us emotionally and tap into old and very established belief patterns and past programming, and 2) we are inclined to provide solutions to our children rather than being curious and having a desire for more information.

As a counselling skill, I can tell you that most counsellors in training find active listening and reflective comments very difficult skills to perfect. It takes a while

before reflective comments sound natural. So you may feel like actively listening to your children and reflecting back what you have heard feels very unnatural to you. GOOD! That means you are indeed feeling the discomfort of learning a new skill, and sensing the awkwardness of it. Just like learning to ride a bicycle, you'll wobble along for a while, and your kids might even tease you about it ("Hey, stop repeating everything I say!") Your job is to work the skill until it starts to feel more natural. Remember, you are re-programming your brain, and it takes a while for those synapses to fire and wire together. In the meantime, when your kids complain about you parroting them, just explain that you're working on a new skill that is meant to help make communication clearer. Let them know that you are motivated to fully understand them and listen better than ever before.

### **More Practice**

To get more practice, sit down with your partner or another adult and ask them to read the following statements, one by one. After each statement, use Active Listening to reflect what was said or guess at the meaning or feelings. Then ask your helper if they thought you were fairly accurate. If not, try again. If your helper has read this section, have them practice Active Listening while you read some statements or make up some of your own. Then say how close they came to reflecting what you were meaning or feeling.

1. "I don't see why I can't ride my bike after dark. Donald and Rob are allowed by their parents!"
2. "But she hit me first so she had it coming to her!"
3. "Why do I have to go to bed now? I'm not tired and I don't want to go. Anne always gets to stay up to see the good TV programmes!"
4. "Do you have to remind me to do my jobs as soon as I get home from school? What's your problem? I swear you just like nagging me!"
5. "John and his friends never pick me to be on their team when we play football with all the other kids."
6. "Mom, Jeremy took my toy! I was playing with it first and then he grabbed it when I put it down. It's mine, and he can't play with it!"

## **Your Assignment in Active Listening**

Where to start practicing? Okay, how about with everyone else BUT your kids. Let's leave the kids out of the practice until you get a good feel for what active listening sounds like, and it starts to flow for you.

So, start with the adults in your life. It could be people you are close to, people you work with, or it could be casual conversations you have with your neighbors.

Not ready to start this with people? Then try this: Tune your radio to a talk show, listen to what is being said for a sentence or two, then turn it off and repeat back what you heard. Here's your script to fill in:

It sounds like \_\_\_\_\_, is that right?

Tell me more.

Or

So I'm hearing you say that \_\_\_\_\_, did I get it?

What else do I need to know?

I hope this practice and the tips get you into the flow of Active Listening. In our next unit we will be looking at "I" Statements – a tool for you to express your concerns and issues in a clear manner that cannot be argued against, and does not raise the defenses of the listener, if done well.

We are working toward Collaborative Problem Solving, in which all these communication skills and personal awareness about triggers will be utilized to solve conflict in your families. Keep up the good work!

*WHEN YOU ARE READY, TRY USING ACTIVE LISTENING THE NEXT TIME YOUR CHILD COMES TO TELL YOU SOMETHING. SEE HOW LONG YOU CAN REFLECT WHAT THEY SAY, AND NOTICE HOW MUCH THEY ENJOY TALKING TO YOU.*