



ChangemakerCommunities

The World Is Waiting For You...



Parenting With Purpose

Request #2: Listen

“One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.”

Bryant H. McGill

If you LISTEN to me,
I will feel understood.

What does it mean to LISTEN?

How's this for a starting point? The number one complaint teens have about their parents is, “They don't listen to me!” The number one complaint parents have about their teens? Yup, “They don't listen to me!” It seems if we can figure out this listening thing, we'll be halfway to a better relationship without even breaking a sweat!

So what's the big deal? Everyone knows how to listen, right? Well.....

“Any problem, big or small, within a family, always seems

To start with bad communication.

Someone isn’t listening.

Emma Thompson

The definition of “listen” is:

to make a conscious effort to hear.

That’s it. A conscious effort to hear. Not interrupt, not intervene and not interpret. Just hear what the other person is saying. Doesn’t sound that difficult. But it must be, because we don’t do it right.

Think about your own listening skills. When your spouse or parent or teen or child wants to tell you something, how do you listen? If you’re like most people, you listen with the assumption that the speaker wants your advice, don’t you?

You almost can’t hear what they’re saying because you are so busy preparing yourself to come up with a solution. And when they’re finished speaking? You launch right into what they need to do to “fix” their issue. You tell them how you would handle it or worse, how YOU handled it, when the same thing happened to you!

For the most part, people listen to “respond.” No wonder there is such a disconnect between a parent and a teenager or between a husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend. Well, there is a better way and it is called, ***listening to understand.***

Listen to Respond vs. Listen to Understand

It's not easy to do. In fact, it takes a lot of practice. Lots of practice. Let me start by saying that sometimes your child WILL want your advice. But I promise you, if that's the case, they will ASK you for it. That's not what we're talking about here. Instead, we are talking about developing your listening skills so that you no longer listen to respond, but rather listen to actively understand.

Again, we are working on the parent/teen relationship. But this type of listening works wonders with all relationships, even with your young children. Especially with your young children. Actually, if you get this figured out when your child is 4 years old, you may just sail through the teen years! But it will take a conscious effort, and it will take practice.

Your job, then, is to listen openly, without passing judgement. And if possible, listen for the "core" or underlying issue. Remember, unless the speaker asks for advice, stop offering it!

We're also not listening to talk about "us." It's odd how that happens and how easily it does. Your teen is telling you about something that happened at school and suddenly you're telling her all about the time that it happened to you one hundred years ago. Does this sound familiar? "Well, when I was a teenager..." or, "If I were you, I'd blah blah blah..."

It's so hard not to do that! We want them to know that we were teens once and that we survived and therefore, we understand, but I'm telling you... STOP IT!

We're not talking about you. We're talking about them!! Try this:

Listen with your mouth SHUT!

And then, when it's your turn to speak, try asking a question for further understanding before you respond. Now your teen knows that you've heard what she's been saying and that you want to know even more about how she feels. Now she feels validated

POV Listening

Let me tell you a little story...

A long time ago, before Diana created the Parent Coach Approach to parenting teens, she was a movie director. And one of her favorite tools was the POV (point of view) shot. Here's how it works.

Have you seen the movie ET, about the extra-terrestrial who lands on earth but wants to go home? Everyone knows ET, right? Well, there is a scene in the movie where the little girl is trying to hide ET from the bad guys who are coming to take him away. The first thing the audience sees is a shot of a pile of stuffed animals. But if we look closely, we can see that one of the stuffed animals is actually ET trying to fit in with the toys as if he is one of them. But the next shot is a reversal of the camera. Instead of us looking into the room to see ET, we are now in ET's position, looking out at the room! In essence, the director takes the actor away and puts the camera in his place, so that the audience is now looking at a scene from the eyes of the actor. We see the scene from the actor's *point of view*.

This is a common practice in movie production and is very effective because it helps the audience feel what the actor is feeling, to see what the actor sees. Diana realized that she needed to practice looking at a scene from her son's eyes, to try to feel what HE'S feeling and to see what HE sees. And it worked! It helped her take herself out of the conversation so she could simply hear what her son was saying.

There are actually 3 levels of POV listening:

1. Listening from YOUR point of view
2. Listening to THEIR point of view
3. Listening FROM THEIR point of view

This is where you have to start paying attention. What kind of listener are you?

Level one is very superficial. You take whatever they say and turn it around so that it involves you. Most people are level one listeners. It's easy to see this by paying attention to your everyday conversations. It's not our fault that we are terrible listeners, it's the way we are wired. But we can learn to change.

Level 2 listening goes a little deeper. This level involves gathering facts and getting more information. It is obvious that you are interested in what the speaker is saying and that you want to know more. It shows that you care.

Level 3 listening is the most difficult form of listening. It is the ET type, where you put yourself in the other person's shoes and try to feel what they are feeling and see what they are seeing. This is our ultimate goal as a parent, or even as a spouse, daughter, employer, etc. It's the Holy Grail of listening. When you master this level, you are absolutely listening to understand and I guarantee your relationships are improving. Let's look at some examples.

“So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.”

Jiddu Krishnamurti

EXAMPLE #1:

Let's say your daughter comes home from school and is obviously upset. She says, "All the girls were talking about me today. I think my best friend hates me."

* Level 1 listening:

You say, "Oh, that's terrible. I remember when I was in high school and my friend and I had a fight. She told everyone what I said and it felt like the whole school was against me."

* Level 2 listening:

You say, "I'm so sorry to hear that. Are you sure they were talking about you? Do you have any idea what they were saying? Did something happen the other day at the party?"

* Level 3 listening:

(Take a deep breath and think for a minute before you respond)

"I'm so sorry honey. That must be so painful. It must be so hard to feel this from your best friend. The two of you have been best buddies since grade school."

Can you see the difference? Can you see why a household of level one listeners is not exactly ideal? I don't expect your teens to be great at this, but if we, the parents, can always be in the world of level 2 and 3 listening, we will be well on our way to a great relationship, regardless of where we are right now.

"The process of attentive listening makes the other person feel important, valued, and heard."

Susan C. Young

EXAMPLE #2:

My friend was at a wedding where the bride was an only child. Her father was having an extremely hard time knowing that his beloved daughter was moving away and starting a life of her own. My friend (and POV believer) tells the story of the father going from table to table, just looking for someone to acknowledge his pain, but he was hearing things like:

- * Level 1 listening:

“You’ll be ok. When my daughter left it only took a few months for us to get used to it.”

- * Level 2 listening:

“It must feel like a fresh start for you. How do you feel about this? What are you going to do to keep yourself busy? Maybe you can do some traveling now. You should buy an RV. Where would you and your wife go?”

- * Level 3 listening:

But when he got to my friend’s table, she decided to go all level 3 on him. She took a deep breath and simply said “It must be so sad to know that your daughter will be so far away from you.” And that’s all it took. He broke down and started sobbing. Big tears. When he regained his composure, he said to her, “Thank you for acknowledging my feelings. I desperately needed someone to do that tonight.”

Sometimes our kids just need that too.

See? My friend didn’t try to fix him. She didn’t try to change things for him or give him an alternative to missing his daughter. She put herself in his shoes. She thought for a minute about how painful it must be to watch your only daughter move away and that’s what she said. And it worked. He let it all out and was better for the rest of the night. How simple was that?

We really don't need to make this terribly complicated. But it does take some practice. It's human nature to try to fix things for the people we love. However, sometimes they need to fix it themselves or they need to learn to live with whatever is happening. Here's the bottom line: when your teen comes into the room and wants to talk to you, stop what you're doing. Turn to face your child. Give them your complete attention. And then listen to what they have to say. Not to fix it or tell them about how you would handle the problem or issue. Just listen. Put yourself in their place and let them talk. Put down the paper. Stop doing the dishes. Turn off your cell phone. Turn and face your child. And guess what? If your kid is 4 years old? Do the same thing! Put down your phone. Stop doing the dishes. Turn and look at your precious little kid and say, "What do you want to talk about?"

Remind yourself to be in a state of learning, curiosity and openness and it will be impossible for you to be judgmental. After they have said what they want to say, you should respond in a compassionate way. When a young person feels heard, it increases the chance for more communication, better connection and to be able to talk about the tough stuff. Always follow their lead. You will know when they are asking for your opinion. And when they do, give it to them as a level 2 or 3 listener.

Remember most of us are wired to be level 1. We want to relate their story to our story, but that's not what your children want. They want to be heard and understood. Easier said than done. But with a little practice and concentration, you will be the one they come to when they're feeling down or confused. And the earlier you master being a good listener, the better your relationships will be and the more your children of all ages will feel understood.

Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. WE just have to be willing to sit there and listen."

Margaret J. Wheatley

Practicing Your Listening Skills

I honestly believe that learning to listen (correctly) is one of the hardest things parents need to do, but also one of the most rewarding. Teenagers can tell if you're really paying attention to them. They can see your body language and feel if you're rushing them. But oh, if they get the impression that they have your undivided attention and you listen without interrupting and without offering advice? Well, that's when great things start to happen! It's just hard to do that because if you're a parent, you're busy. That's a given. But I promise it will be worth it to give this a try.

Active listening obviously requires the receiver to suspend his own thoughts and feelings in order to attend exclusively to the message of the child.”

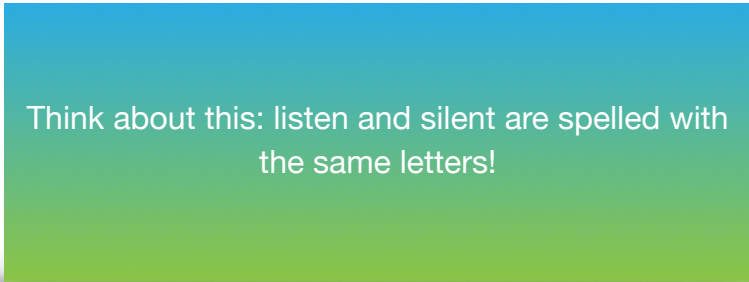
Dr. Thomas Gordon

PRACTICE #1 - POST IT

Write “Listen To Understand” on a 3x5 index card or sticky note. Look at it as often as you can. Remind yourself over time by repeating it silently, especially when you are with your teen or younger child. Leave a note in your car so you can get “in the zone” before you get home to your kids. Being prepared will set you up for success.

PRACTICE #2 - PAY ATTENTION

Just stop. The next time your teen (or younger child) starts talking to you, lay down your phone. Turn off the tv. Put aside the bills. Stop doing the dishes. Take a breath and switch gears. Turn to your son or daughter and offer your full, undivided attention while they are talking. Face them directly, keep quiet and don't interrupt them. They may need to process their thoughts out loud. Let them. And listen.



Think about this: listen and silent are spelled with the same letters!

PRACTICE #3 - ACCESSIBILITY

Reserve time each week for "listening." Whether you meet at their favorite restaurant, get ice cream or even just meet at the kitchen table on Sunday evening, make yourself available to your teen. When my three daughters were younger, we would have "girl talk" every night as I was putting them to bed. They could talk about anything and everything and I was just there to listen. Now that they're older, when they need to talk about something, they just say "girl talk" and I know it's time to get quiet and listen. Having a predetermined time set aside for listening to your children will help open up further communication. They will trust you and know you will be there for them when they need you.