

Avoiding Hearing "You're not listening!"

by Kathy Slattengren

Listening is one of those skills that really doesn't seem like it's all that difficult. Why then do so many children report that their parents don't listen to them?

Maybe it's because there are a lot of ways for parents to unintentionally stop conversations with their kids. For example, if your child is telling you about being nervous for an upcoming test, these types of responses will probably leave your child feeling unheard:

- **Analyzing:** "You always worry about tests and then end up doing great."
- **Criticizing:** "If you would have been studying every night for the last week like I suggested, you wouldn't need to be nervous now."
- **Reassuring:** "You've studied enough. I'm sure you'll do great on the test."
- **Giving advice:** "If you study an hour right before going to bed, you'll probably remember more for the test tomorrow."

These types of responses are considered roadblocks to conversation because they tend to shutdown communication. It is extremely easy to accidentally use these roadblocks when talking to children.

If you want your children to feel heard, a better approach is to

- **Stop** what you are doing
- **Look** at your child
- Listen carefully - **pay attention** to the body language
- When your child is done speaking, **summarize** what you heard

When you summarize what you heard, you are giving your child the opportunity to clarify or correct your understanding of what was said.

Good listening takes time, patience and attention. You can't fully listen while also watching TV or working on the computer. Communication involves not only words but also body language, eye contact and tone of voice. So in order to understand your child's message, you need to both hear the words and watch how they are said.

The importance of listening was clearly demonstrated to me during a company gathering at Wilson Learning where I worked over 20 years ago. We were divided into small groups and one of the exercises was to have each person in the group spend five minutes talking about whatever they wanted. The rest of the group needed to listen carefully. No interrupting, no questions, no comments. What surprised me was how many people ended up in tears during their five minutes of talking. It seemed that having a small group of people actually listening for five minutes was a rare and special occasion.

If listening for five minutes has that large an impact on adults, just think what it can do for your relationship with your children!

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