

Listening to our children.

Why is it important to listen to our children?

For them:

- It helps them to think. Providing a sounding board encourages our children to verbalise their thoughts, thus assisting them in making sense of the world.
- It shows our respect for them, because they can then see that we value their opinions.
- It demonstrates our love for them, because they can see that we are happy to put aside our time just to be with them and see life from their point of view.
- It helps their self-esteem by supporting them in solving their own problems.

For us:

- It helps us to maintain a close and healthy relationship with our children.
- It helps us to understand their view of the world.
- It helps us to gain their trust and respect.
- It increases the chances of them listening to us, because they will have learnt good listening skills from us and because our understanding of their perspective will make it easier for us to communicate with them on their terms and in language that they understand.

There are different ways in which we can listen to our children. On a very superficial level, we can carry on with what we're doing when our child interrupts us and barely listen to the words being spoken. Our minds are on our own agenda and focusing on what our response might be to our child's question, how we can fix their problem, or how we can change their minds about something. This type of listening is rarely helpful to either our child or us.

How about if we stop what we're doing and give our child our full attention?

To listen more deeply and effectively we need to be totally with the child's agenda, not ours, giving advice only when asked and speaking otherwise only to utter words of encouragement and support or the occasional question. Some parents have told me that they have experienced

occasions where they have listened silently to their child and nothing more than that and yet their child has talked openly for several minutes, working through a problem and thinking aloud to find a solution, almost in the same breath. They feared that if they had dared to interrupt, then their child would have lost their train of thought and their quest to find the right solution for them. So, sometimes the best thing to do is to do nothing – yet it can be quite a challenge just to sit there and listen!

At the deepest level of listening, we can engage all our senses. I would suggest that this is appropriate for the most difficult of conversations. We might need to hold our child before they can even begin to voice difficult emotions. We will need to watch their body language and pay attention to their tone of voice. These observations will give us extra clues as to their thoughts and feelings on what they are saying.

Sometimes, we can help our child clarify their thoughts simply by summarising for them what they have just told us. Contrary to what our instincts tell us to do, where they have just expressed a painful emotion, it is often more helpful when we repeat it back to them rather than deny it or try to minimise their feelings. Facing and acknowledging the difficult feeling seems to have the effect of diffusing it whereas our denial is likely to add fuel to the fire by convincing the child that we do not understand or are not supporting them.

Thus, skilful listening is a habit worth cultivating for the benefit of all members of the family.

© Sally Lever 2005. www.sallylever.co.uk

Sally Lever is a Sustainable Living Coach who specializes in supporting those who are downshifting or otherwise moving towards a more sustainable way of life. She offers one-to-one coaching, teleclasses in "How to step off the Treadmill" and a free email newsletter.