

Teaching the Way of Love

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Do you really listen to your family members?

One of the greatest gifts that you can give a child is to convince them that they are (and will always be) a part of your family. Children must be confident that they will always find love within the family; that they will always be part of your community of persons no matter what happens. As the parent, you are the one who can make them confident that they will always have a place at your table. And how do you do that? By learning to listen with an undivided heart.

Becoming a good listener take practice and commitment. It is not something that comes naturally to most of us. In fact, I learned the hard way that I was a poor listener when my son came up to me, tugged on my leg and said, “Mommy – I want to show you something.” I was totally focused on something else, so I asked him to describe what he was holding. I felt another tug at my leg and heard a second request to pay attention. Again, I attempted to multi-task rather than look at him. What came next is forever etched in my memory. My son tugged for a third time and said, “Mommy, I want your eyes to listen to me.” Clearly, my son realized that I wasn’t fully listening. And, I am sure that he was wondering if I really cared about him or just pretended to.



Listening is how you convince someone that you care deeply for them and what to enter into a closer relationship with them. It is how you enter into their invisible world and grasp what is happening *inside* them. Listening gives you access to both the *what* and the *why* of their feelings. When you take the time to fully attend, children can share their deepest thoughts with you – both those that are good and bad –in hopes that you will say, “I still love you and I commit to help you think this thru.” Listening is how you validate their worth and their importance as they grow into an adult. It is how you convince the other that they will always be part of your clan.

How do you become a better listener? Begin with a decision to listen – just listen. When a child begins sharing something with you, resolve to remove all the distractions that pull you away from the conversation. Put down your phone. Stop what you are doing. Look your child in his or her eyes and FOCUS on them.

As you listen, show them that you are paying attention with an occasional nod. Affirm them by saying, “I understand”, “Yes, go on”, “I see” or “I didn’t know that.” These small gestures visibly reassure your child that you are “all there” and they are securely within the family.

As possible, repeat what you hear and give any underlying emotion a name. For example, if your child says, “school is a waste of my time,” you can say, “school is frustrating you right now. Help me understand why.” Rephrasing and naming feelings can keep the conversation going because it creates a meaningful exchange.

At some point, you may need to comment on what you are hearing because your child has told you something that is immoral or harmful. Be mindful that comments are meant to guide your child towards what is right and good. They are meant to develop your child’s ability to choose the good with his or her free will. Therefore consider if your comment should be shared immediately or if it can wait. Your child may just need to be heard. They just want you to know what they are thinking. They do not want you to “fix” them or the situation. Rather they just want you to reassure them and demonstrate love. If you are in doubt about whether your child just wants you to listen or if they want input, ask them. You can simply say, “Do you want me to just listen, or do you want me to comment?” If they say, just listen, save your comment for a later conversation. It is perfectly fine to let them know that will wait to comment. Just remember to set a time to share your guidance and thoughts. A good rule of thumb is to do so within 48 hours.

All children need to be assured that their parents will hear them out. They need to be confident that the questions and ideas they want (and need) to express will be received rather than rejected. As a parent, you have the privilege to create an environment in your home where each member can come to the table and share what is happening to them. It is your honor and duty to listen and then guide them to what is the right, good, and best direction. This is how you strengthen your bond with them, convinced them of your unconditional love and create a community of persons that is strong, safe, and enduring.



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