



Understand your child better: THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING!

BY APARNA SAMUEL BALASUNDARAM, PSYCHOTHERAPIST

As parents we often find ourselves complaining that our child, 'Just does not listen!' In my experience, this is often a reflection of how we listen, or rather do not listen to them! Parents are used to the role of giving instructions, correcting or teaching their children. So, understandably for a parent to stop and listen may not come intuitively, and for many, it takes a conscious effort.

However, listening is one of the most important and foundational skills a parent must learn and practise. Listening properly to your child necessitates a holistic and contextually-sensitive approach. This approach is called 'active' listening.

As the term suggests, 'active' listening is more than just hearing the words; it means to actively engage in the communication process, not just with your ears, but also with your eyes and heart. It is to 'look behind and beyond' the mere words that your child may be saying by deciphering the unsaid words and the emotions behind them. As you practise 'active' listening, you will be able to reflect on the content and feelings of your child's communication.

The reason why this approach is important is that when you actively listen to your child, you are sending a message that he is valued and how he feels is important to you. This makes him feel acknowledged, understood and cared for and builds his level of trust in you. This, in turn, means that he will be more willing to be open and honest. He will share his fears, questions and concerns, without feeling that he will be judged, criticized or ridiculed. Many problems can be solved and even prevented when parents use active listening.

THE HOW OF ACTIVE LISTENING:

To understand how you can develop the skill of active listening, we must first look at our usual responses as parents.

Let us examine a scenario where your child comes back from school, flings his bag on the bed and says, 'My Math teacher is so mean, I hate Math, why do I need to learn word problems?'

Your instinctual responses could be one of the following:

- Pick up your bag at once, how dare you throw your

books, they give you knowledge! They are Goddess Saraswati! If I ever did that as a child, my mother would hit me!' – **critical parental response**

- 'You never pay attention in Math class, you make so many careless mistakes and then when your teacher cuts marks, you say she is mean' – **judgmental parental response**

- 'Oh my poor baby, don't worry, I hated Math too. Anyways, you are so creative and great at English and cricket, as long as you pass in Math, it is enough.' – **consoler parental response**

- 'I know, even Radha's mother was complaining about this Math teacher! I will speak to the principal tomorrow and set this straight' – **rescuer parental response**

- 'Hmmm, Math is getting tough and teachers do not have the patience to teach, what you need is 1:1 attention, let's sign you up for tuition' – **problem solver parental response**

If any of these responses sound familiar, you are NOT actively listening. In order to actively listen, you have to follow these THREE simple steps:

- ▶ **STOP** what you are doing, make eye contact and pay attention to body language.

- ▶ **RECOGNIZE** the feeling behind what your child is saying, label it and reflect that back.

You could say, 'You are (insert feeling word) because (state reason for the feeling)'.

So for the above example you would say,

'You are feeling frustrated because you are having difficulty understanding word problems.'

- ▶ **ENCOURAGE** your child by pointing out similar situations that he may have dealt with in the past. Then help him to come up with possible solutions.

'Remember when you first started swimming? It took time, but now you swim like a fish! Word problems initially can be tricky too. What do you think you can do to get more comfortable with them?'

The more you practise 'active' listening, the easier it will become and you will reap the benefits of a stronger bond and understanding with your child! ☺