

# Listening to children

Ages 3-12

Children don't listen to what we say. They watch what we do.

If this is true, one of the most important things we can do to get children to listen to us is to listen to them. Since being able to communicate well is a skill that will help your child succeed in the world, active listening will help develop your child's self-confidence and important language skills.

Listening is an important way to love your children and help them grow into responsible adults. When children don't feel heard, they might find other ways to express themselves—making excess noise, whining, or acting out. When you listen to children, the stress level in your home often goes down.

When families listen to each other, the bonds are stronger and the family is healthier. Listening is an important way family members say, "I care about you." To help children grow in a home where they feel cared for, try to make a point of stopping what you are doing and listening. This is as important as talking and hugging.

A child who feels heard will be more likely to talk to you when things aren't going well. This is important when a child is young, and it will become increasingly important as the child grows older and the problems and decision have longer-lasting effects.

## Ways to Listen

Listening doesn't take a lot of time. In fact, it just takes a few minutes of listening for children to learn that they are appreciated and valued. It may be unreasonable to expect to listen all the time. When you can't listen, simply tell the child when you can. If you have answered the same question several times, say, "I answered that question."

Here are some tips about listening to children.

**Look.** When you look at your child, you are listening to more than their words. Try to position yourself so you can look into your child's eyes. Facial expressions and silence can be as important as words. This is important especially when children are younger and their language is limited.

**Encourage talk.** As your child learns self-expression, the words may not come out right. Children need to make mistakes in a trusting environment. Communication is about understanding, not perfection.

**Ask questions.** Ask questions that require more than yes or no answers. If your child is talking, ask questions about the subject to encourage further discussion.

**Relax.** Listening is a time to slow down and focus your energy to really hear what your child is saying.

**Acknowledge feelings.** When you encourage talking, you may hear some things you don't like. When a child tells you how she feels, avoid saying, "you shouldn't be mad!" Instead, you can say, "I know you are feeling mad." If it makes sense, ask, "Can I help?"

## Time to Listen

Make a point to set aside a special time each day to listen. Pick a time when your child is calm and distractions are limited. The moments before a child goes to sleep can be a perfect time to slow the pace.

When we listen with our minds and hearts, we model respect and show love. Along with encouraging confidence and important social and language skills, listening shows children how to value and respect you and others.