



Parent **E**ffectiveness **T**raining

The proven program for raising responsible children



art One



ow To Listen



o Kids Will Talk

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PARENT EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING (P.E.T.)

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Nobel Peace Prize Nominee

INTRODUCTION

This is the first part of my three part summary of Dr Thomas Gordon's 365 page bestseller - over 4 million copies sold! Part One is about HOW TO LISTEN SO KIDS WILL TALK, Part Two is about HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL LISTEN. Part Three is about HOW TO TALK SO NO ONE LOSES. One of the regrets of my life is that I did not know about these methods and skills while my own children were small, and more especially, that my parents weren't trained to be more effective parents. If they had known better, I would have remembered them with more heart-felt fondness than I do, and I would not have had to go through months of therapy to forgive them for the errors they committed in raising me in the best way they knew.

Dr Gordon's model has become a part of the way we all talk about communicating and resolving conflicts. Almost everyone nowadays has heard of *Active Listening*, *I-Messages*, and *no-lose conflict resolution*. It applies to *all relationships* - at home, at work, at school, and in the world at large. Its terminology can be found in psychology texts, books, and courses for business leaders, in adult education courses, and, in fact, everywhere interpersonal communication and conflict resolution are important topics.



Parents are *blamed* but *not trained*. Millions of new mothers and fathers take on a job each year that ranks among the most difficult anyone can have: taking an infant, a little person who is almost totally helpless, assuming full responsibility for his or her physical and psychological health. What more difficult and demanding job is there? Yet, how many parents are trained for it?

If you are reading this, you probably already know that the methods you have been using up till now have not been that effective. You have been using the same methods that were used by your parents, by their own parents, and by their parents' parents. *You have been using 2,000 year old methods!* Using P.E.T. methods, you can raise children who are responsible, self-disciplined, and cooperative without relying on the weapon of punishment, or fear of punishment. You can raise children who will not turn against you and shut you out as teenagers, but who will continue to have a meaningful interpersonal relationship with you into adulthood.

THREE TYPES OF PARENTS

Almost without exception *parents can be categorized into three groups - the “winners,” the “losers,” and the “oscillators.”* The first group believe in restricting, setting limits, demanding certain behaviors, giving commands, and expecting obedience. They resolve conflicts between themselves and their children in such a way that the parent wins and the child loses. They believe that children need parental authority and that parents know what is best for their children.

The “losers” avoid setting limits and don’t condone authoritarian methods. When conflict occurs, it is the child who wins and the parent who loses.

Probably the largest group of parents is made up of those who find it impossible to follow consistently either one of the first two approaches. They oscillate back and forth between being strict and lenient, restrictive and permissive, winning and losing. They are permissive until the children get so bad the parents can’t stand them. Then they use their authority and get so strict that they can’t stand themselves. These are the parents who are most confused and uncertain, and whose children are often the most disturbed.

Although there is no gimmick or quick road to effective parenthood, the “no-lose” method is the master key to parent effectiveness. This method of bringing discipline into the home through effective management of conflict is the heart and soul of P.E.T.

PARENTS ARE PERSONS, NOT GODS

When people become parents, something strange and unfortunate happens. They begin to *assume a role or act a part and forget that they are persons.* they feel they must take up the mantle of “parents.” They earnestly try to behave in certain ways because they think that is how parents should behave. In the process, they frequently cease to be human.

Persons-turned-parents feel they must always be consistent in their feelings, must always be loving of their children, must be unconditionally accepting and tolerant, must put aside their own selfish needs and sacrifice for the children, must be fair at all times, and above all must not make the mistakes their own parents made with them. These attitudes actually make parents less rather than more effective, and with time, their children sense that they are *not real, but fake.*

You can accept yourself as a person who has positive as well as negative feelings toward your children. You don’t even have to be consistent to be an effective parent. You don’t have to pretend that you feel loving toward a child when you don’t feel that way. You also don’t have to feel the same degree of lovingness toward all your children. Finally, you and your spouse don’t have to put up a common front in your dealings with your children. But it is essential that you learn to know what it is you *are* feeling.

THE CONCEPT OF ACCEPTANCE

Some of your child's behaviors will be acceptable to you, while other behaviors will be unacceptable. This will be different for different parents. How accepting a parent is toward a child is partly a function of what kind of person that *parent* is. Some people are just rigid and unaccepting not only toward children, but toward other people in general. But the degree of acceptance and unacceptance is also determined by the *child*. Some children are highly aggressive, over-active, strong-willed, and generally difficult to accept, not only for their parents, but for most people in general.

The degree of acceptance you feel toward a child is also influenced by *how you feel at any given moment*, as well as by *the situation* in which you find yourself with your child. When you are feeling energetic, healthy, and happy with yourself, it is likely that you will feel more accepting of certain behaviors than you would if you were tired, or if you have a headache, or worried about your financial affairs.

The existence of *two parents* adds to the complexity of the acceptance picture in families. One parent is often basically more accepting than the other. Furthermore, the line of demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable moves up and down at different times depending on the situation and also the state of mind of each parent.

INCONSISTENCY AND MIXED MESSAGES

Inevitably, then, parents will be inconsistent. Moreover, if parents feel obliged to gang up on a child in a two-against-one alignment, it often promotes "unrealness" on the part of one of the parents.

The idea of *unconditional acceptance is detrimental* to both parents, who find themselves being overly nice until they finally explode, as well as to their children. What happens when a mother genuinely feels unaccepting but her *behavior* appears to the child to be accepting? The child receives a "*mixed message*." This child is in a bind which can seriously affect his psychological health. Everyone knows how frustrating and uncomfortable it is when you don't know which behavior to choose because you get mixed messages from another person.



Children are very perceptive and when they frequently pick up a *discrepancy between the verbal and the non-verbal cues* from a parent, they actually feel *unloved*. It can bring on frequent “testing” on the part of the child, can cause children to carry around a heavy load of anxiety, and foster feelings of *distrust and insecurity*. The same rule applies as with respect - if you want it, you must give it. You can't seriously expect your children to be honest with you about their real feelings if you don't set the example.

WHO OWNS THE PROBLEM?

A core concept in P.E.T. is the *principle of problem ownership*. Its importance cannot be overstated because so many parents fall into the trap of *assuming responsibility for solving problems that their children own*, rather than encouraging them to solve their problems themselves.

Examples:

Child dawdling when the parent is in a hurry.

Child forgetting to call when he'll be late for dinner.

Teenager playing her music so loud the parents can't hear each other.

Such behaviors signal that *the parent owns the problem* and it's up to the parent to modify the behavior that is causing her a problem..

Child rejected by one of her friends.

Child finds his homework is too difficult.

Child angry at his teacher.

Teenager unhappy with being overweight.

The child's needs are not being met, the child is unhappy or frustrated or in trouble. These are problems children experience in their own lives, independent and outside of their parents' lives. In these situations, *the child owns the problem*.

It is when the child owns the problem that parents are so often tempted to jump in, assume responsibility for solving it, and then blame themselves when they can't. *Parents who try to smooth the way for their child, who can't stand to see their child experience any difficulty or problem, are sometimes called “helicopter parents.”*



There is an alternative to help your child: *Let the child own her problem and find her own solutions*. The approach is made up of these elements:

1. All children will inevitably encounter problems in their lives - all shapes and kinds.
2. Kids have an unbelievable and mostly untapped potential for finding good solutions to their problems.
3. If parents hand them prepackaged solutions, children remain dependent and fail to develop their own problem-solving skills.
4. when parents take over or "own" their children's problems, it becomes not only a terrible burden but also an impossible task. No one has the infinite wisdom to always generate good solutions for other people's personal problems.
5. When a parent can accept that she does not own the child's problem, then she is in a much better position to be a facilitator or catalyst or helping agent, helping the child work through the problem-solving process on her own.
6. Kids do need help with certain kinds of problems, but in the long run the kind of help that is most effective is, paradoxically, a form of nonhelp. More accurately, its a way of helping that leaves the responsibility with the child for searching for and finding her own solutions. This depends on *Listening Skills*.

The parent's attitude is, "It seems like you have a problem; do you need help?"

When the child's behavior causes the parent a problem, a different set of skills must be used. These are skills that will be effective in bringing about some change in the unacceptable behavior of the child. When a child is interfering with a parent's rights or is doing something that prevents the parent from meeting her needs, the parent owns the problem and will want to use skills that are helpful to herself. These are *Confrontation Skills*.

Here, the parent's attitude is, "Hey, I've got a problem and I need your help."

HOW TO LISTEN SO KIDS WILL TALK

Why do so many parents get "written off" by their children as a source of help? Why do children stop talking to their parents about the things that really bother them? And why do children find it so much easier to talk to their friends, or to a professional counselor than to their parents?

The most essential ingredient for an effective relationship is the "language of acceptance." Acceptance is like the fertile soil that permits a tiny seed to develop into the lovely flower it is capable of becoming. The soil only *enables* the seed to become the flower. It *releases* the capacity of the seed to grow, but the capacity is entirely within the seed. As with the seed, a child contains entirely within his organism the capacity to develop. Acceptance is the soil - it merely enables the child to actualize his potential.



Most people believe that if you accept a child he will remain just the way he is; that the best way to help a child become something better in the future is to tell him what you *don't* accept about him now.

Therefore, most parents rely heavily on the language of *unacceptance* in rearing children, believing this is the best way to help them. The soil that most parents provide for their children's growth is heavy with evaluation, judgment, criticism, preaching, moralizing, admonishing, and commanding - messages that convey *unacceptance* of the child as he is.

Children often become what their parents tell them they are. *Tell a child often enough how bad he is and he will most certainly become bad.* Apart from this, kids stop talking to their parents. They learn that it is far more comfortable to keep their feelings and problems to themselves.

ACCEPTANCE MUST BE DEMONSTRATED

Unless a parent's acceptance comes through to the child, it can have no influence on him. The child must feel it to be influenced by it. It's a matter of *learning how to talk to people in a "constructive" way*. Certain kinds of messages have a healthy effect on people. They make them feel better, encourage them to talk, help them express their feelings, foster a feeling of worth or self-esteem, reduce threat or fear, facilitate growth and constructive change.

Other kinds of talk are *destructive*. These messages tend to make people feel judged or guilty; they restrict expression of honest feelings, threaten the person, foster feelings of unworthiness or low self-esteem, block growth and constructive change by making the person defend more strongly the way he is.

Nonintervention to Show Acceptance

Acceptance or unacceptance can be demonstrated *verbally or nonverbally*, via gestures, postures, facial expressions, or other behaviors. Parents can show acceptance by *not intervening* in a child's activities, permitting the child to make "mistakes" or find their own solutions to problems. Many parents don't realize how frequently they communicate nonacceptance to their children simply by *interfering, intruding, moving in, checking up, joining in*. Too often adults do not *let children just be*. They invade the privacy of their rooms, or move into their own personal and private thoughts, refusing to permit them separateness. Often this is the result of parental fears and anxieties, their own feelings of insecurity.

A "hands-off" attitude comes hard. Offering help or advice often communicates nonverbal messages of nonacceptance - "You can't do that by yourself," "You need my help," "I don't trust your judgment," "You are might make a mistake," "I don't want you to fail," etc.

Passive Listening to Show Acceptance

Saying *nothing* can also clearly communicate acceptance. *Silence - "passive listening" - is a potent nonverbal message and can be used effectively to make a person feel genuinely accepted.* Professional helping agents make extensive use of silence in their interviews. Talking with someone who merely *listens* can be a wonderful experience when that person's silence makes you feel accepted. You can indicate your attention by saying, "Oh?" "I see," "Mm-hmm."

COMMUNICATING ACCEPTANCE VERBALLY

Parents need to examine how they respond verbally to children, because the key to any parent's effectiveness is found here.

If you would like to try this exercise now, all you need is a sheet of blank paper and a pen. Write down on the paper how you would respond to the messages below. Write down the exact words you would use.

Suppose your fifteen-year-old daughter announces one night at the dinner table:

"School sucks. All you learn is a lot of unimportant facts that don't do you any good. I've decided not to go to college at all. You don't need a college education to be someone important. There are a lot of other ways to get ahead in the world."

Your ten-year-old daughter says to you:

"I don't know what's wrong with me. Ginny used to like me, but now she doesn't. She never comes down here to play anymore. And if I go up there she's always playing with Ashley, and the two of them play together and have fun, and I just stand there all by myself. I hate them both."

Your eleven-year-old says:

How come I have to take care of the yard and take the garbage out? Rey's mother doesn't make him do all that stuff! You're not fair! Kids shouldn't have to do that much work. Nobody has to do all the stupid things I have to do."

One last situation. Your five-year-old boy becomes frustrated when he can't get your attention while you're chatting with guests after dinner. The four of you are talking, when suddenly you are shocked to hear your son shouting loudly:

"You guys are dumb and stupid. I hate you."

The various ways you probably responded to these messages can be classified into categories. There are only about a dozen categories - listed below - into which parents' verbal responses fall. Try to classify the responses you wrote down on your sheet of paper into whichever category fits your responses best.

1. ORDERING, DIRECTING, COMMANDING

Telling the child to do something, giving him an *order* or a *command*:

"I don't care what other parents do, you have to do the yard work!"

"Don't talk to your mother like that!"

"Now you go back up there and play with Ginny and Ashley!"

"Stop complaining!"

2. WARNING, ADMONISHING, THREATENING

Telling the child what *consequences* will occur if he does something:

"If you do that, you'll be sorry!"

"One more remark like that and you'll leave the room!"

"You'd better not do that if you know what's good for you!"

3. EXHORTING, MORALIZING, PREACHING

Telling the child what he *should* or *ought* to do:

"You shouldn't act like that."

"You ought to do this..."

"You must always respect adults."

4. ADVISING, GIVING SOLUTIONS OR SUGGESTIONS

Telling the child how to solve a problem, giving him advice or suggestions, providing *answers* or *solutions* for him:

"Why don't you ask both Ginny and Ashley to play down here?"

"Just wait a couple of years before deciding on college."

"I suggest you talk to your teachers about that."

"Go make friends with some other girls."

5. LECTURING, TEACHING, GIVING LOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Trying to influence the child with *facts*, *counter-arguments*, *logic*, *information*, or your own opinions:

"College can be the most wonderful experience you'll ever have."

"Children must learn how to get along with each other."

"Let's look at the facts about college graduates."

"If kids learn to take responsibility around the house, they'll grow up to be responsible adults."

"Look at it this way - your mother needs help around the house."

"When I was your age, I had twice as much to do as you."

6. JUDGING, CRITICIZING, DISAGREEING, BLAMING

Making a *negative judgment or evaluation* of the child.

- "You're not thinking clearly."
- "That's very immature."
- "You're very wrong about that."
- "I couldn't disagree with you more."

7. PRAISING, AGREEING

Offering a *positive evaluation or judgment*, agreeing:

- "Well, I think you're pretty."
- "You have the ability to do well."
- "I think you're right."
- "I agree with you."

8. NAME-CALLING, RIDICULING, SHAMING

Making the child feel foolish, *putting the child into a category*, shaming him:

- "You're a spoilt brat."
- "Look here, Mr. Know-It-All."
- "You're acting like a wild animal."
- "Okay, little baby."

9. INTERPRETING, ANALYZING, DIAGNOSING

Telling the child what his motives are or *analyzing why he is doing or saying something*; communicating that you have him figured out or have him diagnosed:

- "You're just jealous of Ginny."
- "You're saying that to bug me."
- "You don't really believe that at all."
- "You feel that way because you're not doing well in school."

10. REASSURING, SYMPATHIZING, CONSOLING, SUPPORTING

Trying to make the child feel better, talking him out of his feelings, trying to make his feelings go away, denying the strength of his feelings:

- "You'll feel different tomorrow."
- "All kids go through this sometime."
- "Don't worry, things'll work out."
- "You could be an excellent student, with your potential."
- "I used to think that too."
- "I know, school can be pretty boring sometimes."
- "You usually get along with other kids very well."

11. PROBING, QUESTIONING, INTERROGATING

Trying to find reasons, motives, causes; searching for more information to help you solve the problem:

- "When did you start feeling that way?"

“Why do you suppose you hate school?”
“Do the kids ever tell you why they don’t want to play you?”
“How many other kids have you talked to about the work they have to do?”
“Who put that idea into your head?”
“What will you do if you don’t go to college?”

12. WITHDRAWING, DISTRACTING, HUMORING, DIVERTING

Trying to get the child away from the problem; withdrawing from the problem yourself; distracting the child, kidding him out of it, *pushing the problem aside*:

“Just forget about it.”
“Let’s not talk about it at the table.”
“Come on - let’s talk about something more pleasant.”
“How’s it going with your soccer?”
“I’ll bet the President doesn’t have problems as complicated as yours.”
“We’ve been through all this before.”

Over 90% of of most parents’ responses fall into these twelve categories.



What is Wrong about the 12 Communication Roadblocks?

Verbal responses actually carry more than one meaning or message. For example, “I would suggest you try to treat Ginny better and then maybe she will want to play with you,” conveys more than the simple content of the suggestion. The child may “hear” any or all of the these hidden messages:

“You don’t accept my feeling, so you want me to change.”
“You don’t trust me to work out this problem myself.”
“You think its my fault then.”
“You think I’m not as smart as you.”
“You think I’m doing something bad or wrong.”

Saying, “Oh we all felt that way at some time - you’ll get over it,” may convey these hidden messages:

“You con’t accept me, feeling as I do.”
“You feel its not the school, but me.”

“You don’t take me very seriously, then.”

“You don’t feel my judgment of school is legitimate.”

Here are some of the *effects of the communication roadblocks* as reported by children and adults:

They make me stop talking, shut me off.

They make me defensive and resistive.

They make me argue, counterattack.

They make me feel inadequate, inferior.

They make me feel resentful or angry.

They make me feel guilty or bad.

They make me feel I’m being pressured to change - not accepted as I am.

They make me feel like that person doesn’t trust me to solve my problem.

They make me feel like I’m being treated patronizingly - like I’m a child.

They make me feel I’m not being understood.

They make me feel like my feelings are not justified.

They make me feel I’ve been interrupted.

They make me feel frustrated.

They make me feel like in the witness stand and I’m being cross-examined.

They make me feel the listener is just not interested.

When parents say something *to* a child they often say something *about* him. This is why communication to a child has such an impact on him and ultimately upon the relationship between you and him. Every time you talk to a child you are *adding another brick to define the relationship that is being built* between the two of you. And *each message says something to the child about what you think of him*. He gradually builds up a picture of how you see him as a person.



SIMPLE DOOR-OPENERS

One of the most effective and constructive ways of responding to children’s feeling-messages or problem-messages is the “door-opener” or “invitation to say more.” These are

responses that *do not communicate any of the listener's own ideas or judgments or feelings*, yet they *invite the child to share his own ideas, judgments, or feelings*. They open the door for him they invite him to talk. The simplest of these are such noncommittal responses as:

"I see," "Oh," "Mm-hmmm," "How about that," "Interesting," "Really," "You don't say," "No kidding," "You did, huh," "Is that so!"

Others are more explicit in conveying an invitation to talk or to say more, such as:

"Tell me about it."

"I'd like to hear about it."

"Tell me more."

"I'd be interested in your point of view."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Let's discuss it."

"Let's hear what you have to say."

"Tell me the whole story."

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

"Sounds like you've got something to say about this."

"This seems like something important to *you*."

These door-openers or invitations to talk can be potent facilitators of another person's communication. They encourage people to start or to continue talking. They also *"keep the ball in his court."* They don't have the effect of your grabbing the ball away from him, as do messages of your own, such as asking questions, giving advice, reassuring, moralizing, and so on. These door-openers keep your own thoughts and feelings out of the communication process. Children's responses to simple door-openers will surprise parents. They feel encouraged to move closer, open up, and literally pour out their feelings and ideas.

These door-openers also *convey acceptance of the child and respect for him as a person* by telling him, in effect:

"You have a right to express how you feel."

"I respect you as a person with ideas and feelings."

"I might learn something from you."

"I really want to hear your point of view."

"Your ideas are worthy of being listened to."

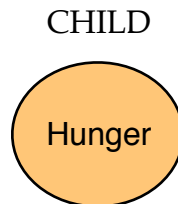
"I am interested in you."

"I want to relate to you, to get to know you better."

Who doesn't react favorably to such attitudes? What person doesn't *feel good when he is made to feel worthy, respected, significant, accepted, interesting?*

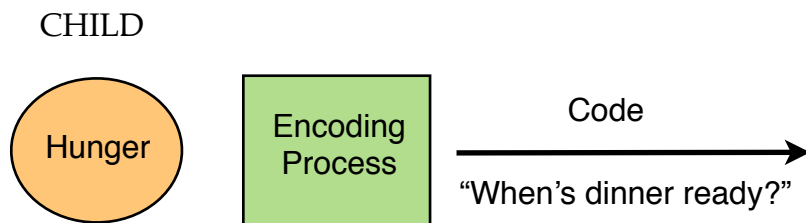
ACTIVE LISTENING

Whenever a child decides to communicate with his parent, he does so because he has a *need*. Its because he has something going on inside him. He wants something; he feels something about something, he feels discomfort; he is upset about something; he owns a *problem* - we may say that the child's organism is in some kind of *disequilibrium*. In order to bring the organism back into equilibrium, the child decides to *talk*. Say the child feels hunger.

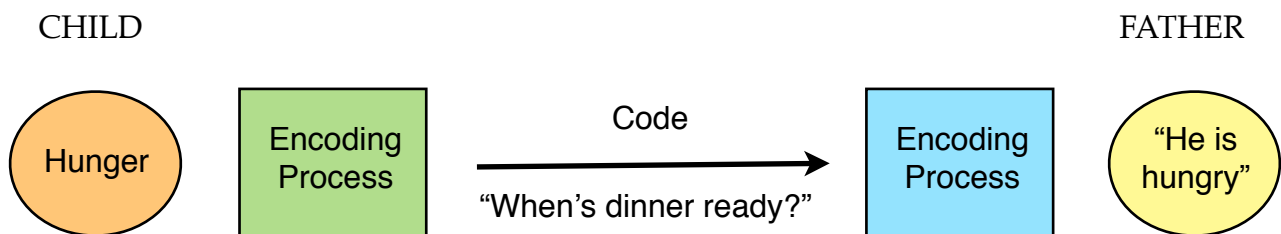


In order to get rid of the hunger (state of disequilibrium), the child becomes a "*sender*," communicating something that he thinks might bring him food. He cannot communicate what is actually going on inside him (his hunger), for hunger is a complex set of physiological processes going on *inside the organism* where it must always remain.

Therefore, to *communicate to someone else* about his hunger, he must select some signal that he thinks might represent "I am hungry" to another. This selection process is called "*encoding*" - the child picks a *code*.



Now let's say this child's father receives this coded message and then goes through a process of *decoding* it so that he can understand its meaning in terms of what is going on inside the child.



If Dad *decodes accurately*, he will understand that the child is hungry. But if Dad happens to *inaccurately decode* the message to mean that the child is anxious to eat so he can go out and play before bedtime, he would be misunderstanding; the communication process has broken down. But here is the problem - the child does not know this, nor does Dad, because the child cannot see the thoughts inside Dad anymore than Dad can see inside the child.

This is what so often goes wrong in the communication process between two people: There is a *misunderstanding* of the sender's message on the part of the receiver and *neither is aware that the misunderstanding exists*.

Suppose, however, that Dad decides to *check on the accuracy of his decoding* just to make sure that he has not misunderstood. He can do this by actually telling the child his thoughts - the result of his decoding process, "You want a chance to play outside before bedtime." Now, having heard his father's "feedback," the child is able to tell his father that he decoded incorrectly:

CHILD: No, I didn't mean that, Dad. I meant I'm really hungry and want dinner to be ready soon.

DAD: Oh, I see. You're very hungry. How about some crackers and peanut butter to hold you over? We can't eat until your mother gets home - about an hour from now.

CHILD: That's a good idea. I think I'll have some.

When the father first "*fed back*" his *understanding* of the child's initial message he engaged in *Active Listening*.

In this particular case, he first misunderstood the child's message, but his feedback told him just that, so he sent another code that finally brought real understanding of the child's message. Here are some other examples of Active Listening:

CHILD (crying): Dylan took my truck away from me.

PARENT: You sure feel bad about that - you don't like it when he does that.

CHILD: That's right.

CHILD: I don't have anyone to play with since Tyler went on vacation. I just don't know what to do around here for fun.

PARENT: You miss having Tyler to play with and you're wondering what you might do to have fun.

CHILD: Yeah. Wish I could think of something.

CHILD: Boy, do I have a stupid teacher this year. I can't stand her.

PARENT: Sounds like you are really disappointed with your teacher.

CHILD: Yeah.

CHILD: Guess what, Dad? I made the soccer team.

PARENT: You're really feeling great about that.

CHILD: Am I!

CHILD: Daddy, when you were a boy what did you like in a girl? What made you really like a girl?

PARENT: Sounds like you're wondering what you need to get boys to like you, is that right?

CHILD: Yeah. For some reason they don't seem to like me and I don't know why.

In each of these cases, the parent was accurately decoding the child's feelings - what was "inside" the child. In Active Listening, the receiver tries to understand what it is the sender is feeling. then he puts his understanding into his own words (code) and feeds that back for the sender's verification. The receiver *does not* send a message of his own - such as evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, analysis, or question. He feeds back *only what he feels the sender's message meant* - nothing more, nothing less.

Here is a longer exchange where the parent consistently uses Active Listening. Note how the child each time *verifies the feedback* of the parent. Also notice how Active Listening makes it easier for the child *to say more, to go deeper, to develop her thoughts further*. Can you feel the movement? Watch the child begin to *redefine her problem on her own; then tentatively develop some insights about herself, and make a good start toward solving her problem*.

MARIA: I wish I could get a cold once in a while like Tanya. She's lucky.

FATHER: You feel you're sort of getting cheated.

MARIA: Yes. She gets to stay out of school and I never do.

FATHER: You really would like to stay out of school more.

MARIA: Yes. I don't like to go to school every day - day after day after day. I get sick of it.

FATHER: You really get tired of school.

MARIA: That's right. I hate the homework, I hate classes, and I hate the teachers.

FATHER: You just hate *everything* about school.

MARIA: I don't really hate all the teachers - just two of them. One of them I can't stand. She's the worst.

FATHER: You hate one in particular, huh?

MARIA: Do I ever! Its that Mrs. Barnes. I hate the sight of her. I got her for the whole year too.

FATHER: You're stuck with her for a long time.

MARIA: Yes. I don't know how I'll ever stand it. You know what she does! Every day we get a long lecture - she stands up there smiling like this (demonstrates) and tells us how a responsible student is supposed to behave, and she reads off all these things you have to do to get an A in her class. Its sickening.

FATHER: You sure hate to hear all that stuff.

MARIA: Yeah. She makes it seem impossible to get an A - unless you're some kind of genius or a teacher's pet.

FATHER: You feel defeated before you even start, because you don't think you can possibly get an A.

MARIA: Yeah. I'm not going to be one of those teacher's pets - the other kids hate them. I'm already not very popular with the kids. I just don't feel too many of the girls like me (tears).

FATHER: You don't feel popular and that upsets you.

MARIA: Yeah, it sure does. There's this group of girls that are the top ones in school. They are the most popular girls. I wish I could get in their group. But I don't know how.

FATHER: You would really like to belong to this group, but you're stumped about how to do it.

MARIA: That's right. I don't honestly know how girls get into this group. They're not the prettiest - not all of them. They're not always the ones with the best grades. Some in the group get high grades, but most of them get lower grades than I get. I just don't know.

FATHER: You're sort of puzzled about what it takes to get into this group.

MARIA: Well, one thing is that they're all pretty friendly - they talk a lot, you know, make friends. They say hello to you first and talk real easy. I can't do that. I'm just not good at that stuff.

FATHER: You think maybe that's what they have that you don't have.

MARIA: I know I'm not good at talking. I can talk easily with one girl but not when there's a whole bunch of girls. I just keep quiet. Its hard for me to think of something to say.

FATHER: You feel okay with one girl but with a lot of girls you feel different.

MARIA: I'm always afraid I'll say something that will be stupid or wrong or something. So I just stand there and feel kind of left out. Its totally lame.

FATHER: You sure hate that feeling.

MARIA: I hate to be on the outside, but I'm afraid to try to get into the conversation.

In this conversation Dad is putting aside his own thoughts and feelings in order to listen, decode, and understand Maria's thoughts and feelings. Note how his feedback generally begins with "you." He refrains from using any of the Communication Roadblocks. He allows Maria to *retain responsibility for her problem*.

Why Should Parents Learn Active Listening?

Some parents who are introduced to this skill say:

"It seems unnatural."

"That isn't how people talk."

"I'd feel like a dork responding to my kid in that way."

"My daughter would think I flipped my lid if I started talking to her that way."

These are understandable reactions because parents are so used to *telling, preaching, questioning, judging, threatening, admonishing, or reassuring*. So what is the purpose of Active Listening?

People free themselves of troublesome feelings when they are encouraged to express them openly. People don't get rid of their feelings by suppressing them, forgetting them, or thinking about something else. *Active Listening fosters catharsis*. It helps children find out exactly what they are feeling. After they express their feelings, the feelings often seem to disappear almost like magic.

Active Listening helps children become less afraid of feelings. "Feelings are friendly" is an expression used in PET to help parents realize that feelings are not "bad." Through Active Listening where the parent accepts the child's feelings, the child is also helped to accept them.

Active Listening promotes a relationship of warmth between parent and child. Being heard and understood by another person is so satisfying that it makes the sender feel warm toward the listener. Children respond with loving ideas and feelings. Similar feelings are evoked in the listener - he feels warmer and closer to the sender. When one listens empathically and accurately to another, he gets to understand that person, to appreciate his way of looking at the world - in a sense, he *becomes that person by putting himself in the person's shoes*. To empathize with another is to see him as a separate person, yet be willing to join with him - to become a companion - for a brief period of his journey through life. It fosters *respect, appreciation, deep caring and love* between parent and child.

Active Listening facilitates problem-solving by the child. People do a better job of thinking a problem through and toward a solution when they can "talk it out." It helps a person in his search for a solution to his problems.

Active Listening influences the child to be more willing to listen to the parents' thoughts and ideas. When someone will listen to one's own point of view, it is then easier to listen to *his*. Children are more likely to open themselves up to receive their parents' messages if their parents first hear them out. When parents complain that their kids don't listen to them, it's a good bet that the parents are not doing an effective job of listening to their kids.



Active Listening "keeps the ball with the child." When parents respond to their kids' problems by Active Listening, they will observe how kids begin to think for themselves. It

encourages the child to find his own diagnosis of his problem, to discover his own solutions. Active Listening *conveys trust*, while messages of advice, logic, instruction, and the like convey distrust by taking over the problem-solving responsibility from the child. It is therefore one of the most effective ways of helping a child become *more self-directing, self-responsible, and independent*.

Attitudes Required to Use Active Listening

Active Listening is not merely a technique that parents pull out of their “tool kit” whenever their children have problems. It is a method for putting to work a set of basic attitudes. *Without these attitudes, the method will seldom be effective; it will sound false, empty, mechanical, insincere*. Here are some basic attitudes that must be present when using Active Listening:

1. You must *want* to hear what the child has to say. This means you are willing to take the time to listen. If you don't have time, you need to say so.
2. You must genuinely *want* to be helpful with this particular problem at this time. If you don't want to, wait until you do.
3. You must genuinely be able to *accept his feelings*, whatever they may be or however different they may be from yours, or from the feelings you think a child “should” feel. This attitude takes time to develop.
4. You must have a deep feeling of *trust* in the child's capacity to handle feelings to work through them, and to find solutions to his problems. You'll acquire this trust by watching your child solve his own problems.
5. You must appreciate that feelings are *transitory*, not permanent. Feelings change - hate can turn to love, discouragement can quickly be replaced by hope. You need not be afraid that feelings will become forever fixed inside your child if you allow him to express these feelings. Active Listening will demonstrate this to you.
6. You must be able to see your child as *someone separate from you* - a unique person no longer joined to you, a separate individual having been given by you his *own* life and his *own* identity. This “separateness” will enable you to “permit” the child to have his *own* feelings, his own way of perceiving things. Only by feeling “separateness” will you be able to be a helping agent for the child. You must be “with” him as he experiences his problems, but not joined to him.



Something happens to a person when he practices Active Listening. To understand accurately how *another person* thinks or feels from his point of view, to put yourself momentarily in his shoes, to see the world as *he* sees it - you as a listener run the risk of having your own opinions and attitudes changed. People actually become changed by what they *really understand*.

To be "open to the experience" of another invites the possibility of having to *reinterpret your own experiences*. This can be scary. A "defensive" person can't afford to expose himself to ideas and views that are different from his own. A flexible person, however, is not as afraid of being changed. And kids who have flexible parents respond positively when they see their mothers and fathers *willing to change, willing to be human*.

PUTTING ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS TO WORK

Mrs. T., and intelligent, well-educated mother of three, confessed, "I now realize how strong my habit is to give my children advice or tell them my solutions to their problems. Its a habit I have with other people too - my friends, my husband. Can I change from being Mrs. Know-It-All?"

My response to Mrs. T. was to give it her best shot, because *children who find effective help in solving problems maintain their psychological health in the face of life's disappointments, frustrations, setbacks, and obstacles. Children who do not, develop emotional problems.*



To recognize when it is appropriate to use Active Listening, parents need to *get tuned in to hearing these I've-got-a-problem kind of feelings*. Here's where the principle of problem ownership comes in.

Remember that *the child has a problem when she is thwarted in satisfying a need*. It is not a problem for the parent because the child's behavior in no tangible way interferes with the parent's satisfying her own needs. Therefore, **THE CHILD OWN THE PROBLEM.**

Active Listening is most appropriate when the child owns the problem, but mostly *not appropriate when the parent owns the problem. When the parent owns the problem, a different set of skills is needed* (next section).

These are examples of problems that would be *owned by the child*:

- Alex is feeling rejected by one of his friends.
- Victor is disappointed because he didn't make the rugby team.
- Linda is devastated because nobody asked her to the matric dance.
- Bonnie is unable to decide what she wants to do in life.
- Ryan is uncertain about whether to go to university.
- Steven is embarrassed because he's overweight.
- Lisa is scared because a girl at school is threatening to beat her up.
- Rodney is getting angry when he loses a game to his brother.
- Kids at school are calling Lauren "stick legs" because she's too thin.
- Heather is feeling troubled because she might fail two school subjects.
- Mike's friend keeps pressuring him to smoke.

Problems such as these are the ones children inevitably encounter as they attempt to cope with life - *their own life. Children's frustrations, puzzlements, deprivations, concerns, and, yes, even their failures, belong to them, not their parents.*



"You said you wanted to talk to me about sex, Dad -
what actually do you want to know?"

This concept is one that parents find hard to accept. Most mothers and fathers are inclined to make too many of their children's problems their own. By doing so, they cause themselves unnecessary grief, contribute to the deterioration of their relationship with their children, and miss countless opportunities to be effective helpers to their children.

Paradoxically this method will *increase* rather than decrease the parent's *influence on their child*, but it is an influence that differs from the kind that most parents try to exert over their children. Most parents are tempted to take over ownership of their children's problems, as in the following case:

ANTHONY: Matteo won't play with me today. He won't ever do what I want to do.

MOTHER: Well, why don't you offer to do what he wants to do? You've got to learn to get along with your friends. (ADVISING, MORALIZING)

ANTHONY: I don't like to do things he wants to do and besides I don't want to get along with him!

MOTHER: Well, go find someone else to play with then if you're going to be a brat. (OFFERING A SOLUTION, NAME CALLING)

ANTHONY: He's the brat, not me. And there isn't anyone else to play with.

MOTHER: You're just upset because you're tired. You'll feel better about his tomorrow. (INTERPRETING, REASSURING)

ANTHONY: I'm not tired, and I won't feel different tomorrow. You don't understand how much I hate him.

MOTHER: Now stop talking like that! If I ever hear you talk about one of your friends like that again, you'll be sorry... (ORDERING, THREATENING)

ANTHONY: (walking away and sulking): I hate this place. I wish I could move.

Here is how the parent can help the same boy with Active Listening:

ANTHONY: Matteo won't play with me today. He won't ever do what I want to do.

MOTHER: You're kinda angry with Matteo. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: Yeah. I never want to play with him again. He's not my friend anymore.

MOTHER: You're so very angry you feel like never seeing him again. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: That's right. But if he's not my friend, I won't have anyone to play with then.

MOTHER: You would hate to be left with no one. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: Yeah. I guess I just have to get along with him somehow. But it's hard for me to stop getting mad at him.

MOTHER: You want to get along better but its hard for you to keep from getting mad at Matteo. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: I never used to - but that's when he always did what I wanted to do. He won't let me boss him anymore.

MOTHER: Matteo doesn't always go along with you want anymore. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: No ... He's not such a baby now. He's more fun though.

MOTHER: You really like him better this way. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: Yeah. But its hard to stop bossing him - I'm so used to it. Maybe we wouldn't fight so much if I let him have his way once in a while. Think that would work?

MOTHER: You're thinking that if you might give in occasionally, it might help. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

ANTHONY: Yeah ... maybe it would. I'll try it.

Here is another situation to illustrate how parents typically try to help their children:

KATHY: I don't want any dinner tonight.

DAD: Come on. Kids your age need to have three meals a day. (INSTRUCTING, PERSUADING WITH LOGIC)

KATHY: Well, I had a big lunch.

DAD: Well, just come to the table anyway and see what we're having. (SUGGESTING)

KATHY: I'm not going to eat anything.

DAD: What's the matter with you tonight? (PROBING)

KATHY: Nothing.

DAD: Well, then get to the table. (ORDERING)

KATHY: I'm not hungry and I don't want to go to the table.

Now here is how the same girl can be helped with Active Listening:

KATHY: I don't want any dinner tonight.

DAD: You don't feel like eating tonight. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: I sure don't. I'm too stressed out to eat.

DAD: Something's really bothering you, is that right? (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: Its worse than that. I'm really scared.

DAD: You're really frightened about something. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: I sure am. Lance called me today and said he wanted to talk to me tonight. He sounded real serious, not like him.

DAD: Makes you feel something's up, huh. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: I'm afraid he wants to break up.

DAD: You'd hate to have that happen. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: It would kill me! Especially because I think he'd like to go out with Alexis. That would be the worst!

DAD: That's what really scares you - that Alexis might get him. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: Yeah. She gets all the good guys. She's sickening - always talking to boys and making them laugh. They all fall for it. She's always got three or four boys hanging around her in the halls. I don't know how she does it - I can't ever think of anything to talk about around boys.

DAD: You wish you could talk as easily as Alexis around boys. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: I guess I want them to like me so much, I'm afraid I'll say something stupid.

DAD: You want so badly to be popular that you're afraid you'll make a mistake. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KATHY: Yeah. But I couldn't do any worse than I'm doing now - standing around like a dork.

DAD: You feel maybe are worse off now than if you did go ahead and talk. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

Another situation where Active Listening can be put to work is when children send *messages that are strangely coded*, making it difficult for the parent to understand just what is going on inside their heads. Often these messages are *coded as questions*:

“Will I ever get married?”

“What does it feel like to die?”

“Why do kids call me a wimp?”

“Daddy, what did you like in girls when you were a boy?”

Peculiar questions often mean that *the child is struggling with a deeper problem*. Active Listening creates an opening for the child to define the problem for herself, and to start the process of problem-solving within herself. Giving *direct answers* to these feelings-coded-as-questions almost invariably results in the parent *muffing the opportunity to be an effective helper on the real problem* the child is grappling with.

Children strive to make sense of what they read or hear about the world - racism, police brutality, sex, drugs, war, global warming, divorce, gangs, and so on. What throws parents off is that kids may state their views in ways that make parents shudder at their naïveté or immaturity. Parent’s motivation may be to contribute to their children’s intellectual development, but it can also be self-centered - to demonstrate their intellectual superiority. The temptation is to jump in with the 12 Roadblocks and straighten the kid out or show her the broader picture. The inevitable effect is *to tune the kid out or start a verbal battle that ends in hurt feelings and cutting remarks*.



You need to ask yourself these rather penetrating questions:

“Does your child have to think like you?”

“Why do you have a need to teach her?”

“Can’t you tolerate an opinion different from your own?”

“Can you help her come to her own way of looking at this complex world?”

“Can you allow her to be where she is in her grappling with an issue?”

“Can you remember how you as a kid had some pretty weird ideas about all kinds of things?”

It is common in so many families that *parents don't listen* - they teach and correct and deprecate and ridicule the messages they hear from the developing minds of their children. When parents begin to *bite their tongues and open their ears*, they are amazed that kids bring up problems that previously were never shared by their kids - drugs, sex, abortion, alcohol, morality, and so on. Active Listening can make the home a place where parents and children can join in deep, penetrating discussions of the complex, critical problems that kids face today.

**THIS IS A
PUT-DOWN-FREE
ENVIRONMENT**



COMMON MISTAKES IN USING ACTIVE LISTENING

Manipulating Children Through "Guidance"

Active Listening is *not a guidance technique toward parent-directed change*. Parents who think that it is, will send indirect messages: the parent's biases, ideas, subtle pressures.

Here's an example:

JAMES: Wow! I got burned today. Two failure warnings - one in Maths and the other in English.

MOM: You're upset (coldly).

JAMES: Course I'm upset.

MOM: You're disappointed (still coldly).

JAMES: That's putting it mildly. It means I won't graduate, that's all. Like, I've had it.

MOM: You feel there's nothing you can do about it because you didn't study enough. (Mom sends her own message here).

JAMES: You mean start studying more? (James heard her message).

MOM: Yes, its certainly not too late, is it? (Now Mother is really pushing her solution.)

JAMES: Study that junk! Why should I? Its a bunch of crap!



But isn't guidance one of parents' principle responsibilities? To guide means to steer in some direction. It also implies that the hand of the parent is on the steering wheel. When parents grab the steering wheel and try to guide a child in a specific direction, they invariably get resistance. Children quickly realize that a parent's guidance means a lack of acceptance of the child as he is.

Opening the Door, then Slamming It Shut

Some parents can't keep up the Active Listening for long enough to *hear the child out completely*. Its like saying, "Come on, tell me how you feel, I'll understand." Then, when the parent hears what the child feels, she quickly shuts the door because she *doesn't like what she hears*. Here's an example:

MOTHER: You look like you're unhappy. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KYLE: Frankie pushed me.

MOTHER: You didn't like that. (ACTIVE LISTENING)

KYLE: No. I'm going to bust him right in the mouth.

MOTHER: Now, that wouldn't be a nice thing to do. (EVALUATING)

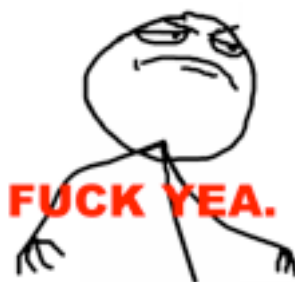
KYLE: I don't care. I'd like to punch him like this (swinging hard).

MOTHER: Kyle, fighting is never a good way to solve conflicts with your friends. (MORALIZING) Why don't you go back and tell him you'd like to make up?

(ADVISING, OFFERING SOLUTIONS)

KYLE: (Silence.)

In this interaction, Kyle *shuts down* because he learned that his mother does not trust him to solve his own problems, that she cannot accept his angry feelings, that she thinks he is not a nice boy, and that parents just don't seem to understand.



The “Parroting Parent”

Please remember that your child’s words (her particular code) are merely the vehicle for communicating feelings. *The code is not the message; it must be decoded by the parent.*

“You’re a mean, smelly rat,” says the child angrily to her father. Obviously, the child knows the difference between a rat and her father, so her message is not, “Dad, you are a rat.” Were the father to respond with “You think I’m a rat,” the child would hardly feel she had gotten her point across. If the father had said, “You’re really angry at me!” she would have said “I sure am” - and would have felt understood.

The following examples show the contrast between merely parroting the code and responses where the parent *first decodes, then feeds back the child’s inner feeling* (the true message he or she is communicating):

BRADLEY: I never get a chance to get the ball when the bigger kids are playing.
PARENT: You never get a chance to get the ball with big kids. (PARROTING THE CODE)
PARENT: You want to play too, and you feel its not fair for them to leave you out. (FEEDING BACK THE MEANING)

LARISSA: For a while I was doing good, but now I’m worse than ever. Nothing I do seems to help. What’s the use trying?
PARENT: You’re doing worse than ever now and nothing you do helps. (PARROTING THE CODE)
PARENT: You’re sure discouraged and it makes you want to give up. (FEEDING BACK THE FEELING)

SAM: Look, Daddy, I made an airplane with my new tools!
PARENT: You made an airplane with your tools. (PARROTING THE CODE)
PARENT: You’re really proud of the airplane you made. (FEEDING BACK THE FEELING)

Listening Without Empathy

Children, even more so than adults, *want other people to understand how they feel when they talk*. Much of what they communicate is accompanied by *feelings*: joy, hate, disappointment, fear, love, worry, anger, pride, frustration, sadness, and so on. They expect empathy from their parents. When parents don’t empathize, they naturally feel that the essential part of them at the moment - their feelings - is not being understood.

Here are a two examples:

REBECCA: Scott (her nine-year-old brother) is a pest. He's mean! Mom, he pulls all my clothes out of the drawers. I hate him. I could kill him when he does that!

MOM: You don't like for him to do that.

REBECCA: Don't like it! I hate it! And I hate him!

A better response might have been, "You're really angry with Scott!"

CAREY: I don't want to go in. Its too deep! And I'm afraid of the waves!

DAD: The water is too deep for you.

CAREY: I'm scared! Please don't make me go in!

The father should have acknowledged her urgent plea with, "You're scared and don't want me to force you into the water."



Active Listening at the Wrong Times

There are times *when kids don't want to talk about their feelings*, even to empathic ears. They may want to *live with their feelings for a while*. They may find it too painful at the moment to talk. Parents should respect the child's *need for privacy in her world of feelings* and not push her to talk.

Sometimes a child *needs different help*. When a child is legitimately asking for information, for a helping hand, or for some special resource of the parent, she may have no need to talk out or work through something. Examples:

CHILD: What time are you and Mom coming home?

PARENT: You are really puzzled as to when we are coming home?

CHILD: How much will I have to pay for insurance if I buy my own car?

PARENT: You're worried about the cost of your insurance.

CHILD: Hey, Mom, can you give me a ride downtown Saturday? I've got some shopping to do.

PARENT: You'd like a ride downtown Saturday.

Parents also discover that their children become perturbed when they try to continue with Active Listening long *after the child is finished sending messages*. Parents need to *know when to quit*. Generally, clues will be forthcoming from the child - a facial expression, getting up to leave, silence, being fidgety, looking at her watch, and so on - or the child might say something like:

"Well, I guess that's about it."

"I don't have time to talk anymore."

"I see things kinda different now."

"Maybe that's enough for now."

"I've got a lot studying tonight."

"Well, I'm taking a lot of your time."

Wise parents back off when they get these clues, *even though it does not seem to them that the particular problem has been solved*. Active Listening often only starts children on the first step of problem-solving - getting the feelings out and the problem defined. Frequently, the children themselves take it from there, eventually winding up with a solution of their own.



