

## **How to Listen Actively to your Children and Teens**

(article written by: Alberta Health Services for their Parent Information Series)

**KIDS NEED TO FEEL HEARD.** Sometimes it may be difficult to hear what they have to say. Other times it may be hard to get them to talk about their thoughts at all. They may think you won't understand. They may be afraid to share their feelings because they think someone may make fun of them. If you practice being open and honest with your children and make it easy for them to talk to you, you will build a stronger relationship with them. This process works in two ways: 1. hearing what your children are saying 2. talking about your own thoughts and feelings with them. It can be tough to talk with your kids. Don't give up! Here are some ideas that may help you.

### **What are the basics?**

To get the whole picture, it is important to listen to both the spoken word and the unspoken feelings. For example, if your children say, "I hate my friends and never want to see them again," the unspoken feelings might be hurt, loneliness or rejection. In this case, the underlying feelings tell you more than the words that were spoken. It is important not to assume that you know what those underlying feelings are. Try encouraging your children to tell you their feelings by saying, "You must be feeling sad to say that." They may correct you and say that they are angry, but this will provide an opening to discuss their feelings. If you don't understand what they are telling you, say it back to them in your own words to make sure you are clear. For example, if they say, "I don't want to go to soccer practice anymore because I always feel stupid," you could say, "So, you don't enjoy soccer practice anymore because of the way the other kids treat you? Please tell me more about why you aren't enjoying soccer anymore." For you to have open communication, it is important to relate your feelings and concerns without judging what your child has said. In the above example, it might be easy to respond by saying, "Don't be silly. This will blow over soon enough." But take a moment to consider what you are really feeling. Worried? Confused? Sad? Try responding in a way that reflects those feelings. "I'm sorry that things are not going well with your friends and I am feeling confused about what went wrong. Please tell me more about that." When you respond this way, your children are more likely to open up and tell you what's going on. You may need to provide an opportunity for them to expand on what they tell you. Using phrases such as "Tell me more about that" can help them to keep talking. Spending time with them doing something you both enjoy can be a terrific opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas. Discuss their interests and let them educate you about what they are passionate about. Talking is a two-way process. It can be hard to practice open communication with your kids, especially if they are acting out. Sometimes your

first reaction is to get frustrated or angry. Remember that many parents feel this way. You are not alone.

### **Four ways to improve communication with your kids:**

1. Ask open-ended questions, such as “Tell me about your day” or “What did you do today?” These allow your child to tell you about events. These questions also require more than a one-word answer.
2. Listen reflectively. You can do this by simply repeating what your children have said or by saying it back to them in your own words. This will make sure that you truly understand what your children are trying to tell you.
3. Affirm your child’s feelings. This makes children feel supported and will make it easier for them to talk to you in the future. An example of this would be: “I understand that it must have been hard for you to come to me about this. I really appreciate your openness.”
4. Summarize what you’ve heard. This reinforces what your children have said and shows that you have been listening to them. Also, keep in mind that there are non-verbal ways of communicating that can also help with open communication. Making eye contact and nodding your head while they are talking are effective ways of helping someone else feel heard.

### **Putting it all together**

Now that you know what the basics are, there is a formula that might help you in talking with your child. First of all, describe the behaviour you are seeing (“When you say you hate your friends”) then describe how you feel (“I feel worried”) and finally describe the effect the behavior has on you (“because I want you to be happy”). If you choose to use this method, use words that feel comfortable to you.

### **It takes time**

Actively listening to your kids can take a lot of practice. Don’t give up. It might take a long time for some kids who are naturally reserved. You know your child and you know the line between prying and healthy curiosity. The rewards of open communication include identifying problems while they are small, preventing misunderstandings and getting to know your child as a person. Your kids need you to listen. Remember, you are very important in your child’s life.

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