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Positive Parenting
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LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN

... be quick to listen, slow to speak ...

James 1:19

Virtually every parent, grandparent, teacher, or lover of children remembers a time when a child stamps their foot, hand on hips, or pulls the adult's face to them and announces, "Listen to me! Just listen to me."

In a busy, multi-tasking world, we are likely to make sandwiches, practice spelling words, change loads of laundry, and still think we are listening when a child speaks to us. Kids are smarter than that. They know when we are listening and when we are physically present, but our minds are elsewhere, planning for the rest of the day, remembering what we need to take to work or pick up at the store, concerned about the health of an ailing grandparent.

But isn't it a parent's job to speak to the child, to teach, instruct, and correct? Yes, of course, that is important. So, why does the writer of James tell us to be "slow to speak?" That is an invitation to think and reflect before we speak, but also to listen first.

We've all seen a Charlie Brown television special. Remember what the children hear when the teacher speaks? "Wa wa wa wa wa wa wa." I think that must be what my children often heard when I opened my mouth. Why? Because I talked too much and listened too little. I repeated the same message over and over again. I didn't consider what were the most important messages my children needed to hear from me. Let us be slow to speak, so that our messages really matter, so that we really believe what we say.

Perhaps most important of all, I didn't always make sure that my children saw me doing the things that I said were important. We are our children's most important teachers and what we do has the most profound impact on the children. If the words we say aren't consistent with what we do, children will believe what we do, rather than what we say ... 100% of the time!

But something else that is vitally important happens when we listen, really listen to children. By our listening, they learn that they are important, that what they think and do really matters to us. They receive the message that they matter.

Miss Kirk sat next to me in the pew before the 9:00 o'clock service, while my dad ushered. We shared that pew from the time I was three until I was eight. In those five years, I don't think I ever gave her a chance to prepare her heart and mind for worship. I talked to her. She was a very shy, proper, Victorian lady. With no children or grandchildren of her own, she chose to love me. I knew that because she listened to me and she remembered what I said. The next week, she would ask follow up questions. Although she was never my Sunday school teacher, I knew how much Jesus loved me because Miss Kirk listened me into the faith!

In the corner cabinet in my dining room, I have one of Miss Kirk's china tea cups. Her nieces gave it to my mother to save for me when I grew up. They brought it to our home when I was eight, just a week after Miss Kirk died, because they had heard from their aunt how much I mattered to her. I will never forget her and I thank God every day that I see that cup that Miss Kirk left Jesus' fingerprints on me, just by listening. May you do the same!

So, who is the child in your life that needs you to "be quick to listen, slow to speak?" You may never know what difference you made in the life of a child by your listening.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

- For each child that you love, set aside a block of time to really listen with all your being. What do the words say? What message do you get from facial expression and body language? What is that child not talking about with you? Try expressing what you "heard," whether it was verbal, postural, or intuitive, to that child. "Are you feeling...?" "Do you want...?" "Are you wondering about ...?" Then, listen again.

- When you want your child to listen to you, choose a time and place that is private, unhurried, and peaceful. Sit close. Touch gently. Establish eye contact. Use a soft, kind voice. Then, share what you want your child to hear. (Remember to use this strategy to express pride, delight, and appreciation, not just to correct your child's behavior.)
- When your child says, "Listen to me," and you thought you were really listening, ask your child what they need you to do (or not do) to show them that you are listening. Please, don't be defensive. You have just been given a huge compliment - your child really, really, really wants you to know them and what they are thinking and feeling.
- Set aside time as a family when each person has time just to talk, without interruption, questions, interpretation, or being hurried along. Set a timer and announce that the one who is speaking gets to talk until the timer goes off or they are done speaking. Close that time but saying, "Thank you for sharing that with us."
- Remind your child that even when you are not listening well, God is always listening, interested, and puts the Holy Spirit to work, interpreting what your child yearns to express. Share some silent time in your prayer with your child to allow them the privacy and space to take it all to God.