



Positive Parenting  
December 2012

### **THE ART OF LISTENING: EARS, EYES, AND HEART**

... when I called, you did not answer,  
when I spoke, you did not listen.  
Isaiah 65:12:b

Even God gets frustrated when no one listens! In Isaiah, God expresses the deep disappointment of not being heard by God's people.

Many of us have had the experience of a child who is stamping a foot or turning our face toward theirs or raising their voice and imploring, "Listen to me!" It is a cry for connection and understanding and significance, worthy of deep listening. As parents, grandparents, and caring adults, children and youth cry out to us to listen, to hear them, to understand.

It is so easy to think that communication is all about the adult talking to the child. After all, there is so much to teach and tell - information, explanations, directions, interpersonal skills, not to mention sharing faith and values.

However, usually the most underused communication tool in a parent's tool belt is listening - often, deeply, with undivided attention. The most important element in our relationship with a child is loving that child. There is no better way to express that love than through deep listening. It gives these messages: "You are worth everything." "You are beloved." "You are an interesting person." "You have something important to say and I want to hear it."

So, how do we practice deep listening, with ears, with eyes, with heart?

- Clear your mind of all the issues and tasks that are vying for your attention
- Be fully present - listen, look, play, respond
- If you can't do it now, make an appointment, when you can be fully present
- Don't interrupt
- Give verbal acknowledgement as your child is talking (Oh ... Mmm ... I see)
- Lean toward your child
- Use gentle, affectionate, reassuring touch
- Listen for feelings, as well as for issues, situations, or information. Acknowledge the feelings. Name them. Accept the feelings, even if you have to limit behavior.
- Listen for what your child isn't saying or isn't talking about

- When tone of voice or body language aren't consistent with their words, trust the non-verbal signals
- Take your child and his or her issues seriously
- Don't bombard them with questions
- Give them in fantasy what you can't or won't give them in reality
- Express your love
- Give hope

So why listen? When Moses saw the burning bush, he turned aside, gave it his undivided attention, and it was then that God spoke to Moses, letting Moses know God's name and God's purpose for him. God said, "Take off your sandals. Where you stand is holy ground." When you are listening to your child, you will get to know your child and understand that where you stand or sit or kneel is holy ground, indeed.

### FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Tuck your kids into bed, even the big, old ones. In the dark, you'll hear about the reality of their lives, the stresses, the challenges, the proud moments, the quandaries. Yes, I know, you have to be up early and you have a hundred things to do before you go to bed, but nothing, nothing, nothing is more important than knowing, understanding, and loving your child.
2. At dinner, go around the table and ask, "What was best (or worst or most exciting or surprising) about your day?" Last month, our three-year old grandson leaned forward and asked, "So, Dad, how was your day?" This is a little boy for whom this nightly check in is a treasured family tradition, one even he can initiate. Beats the pants off complaining about the green vegetable!
3. Car time can be a wonderful opportunity to listen deeply. Often, kids will tell us things from the back seat that they might not reveal when we are sitting face to face. The same is true of driving a carpool and having the opportunity to hear what is important to this group of kids. Sometimes, you will be surprised at what they will discuss in your presence. Yes, they mean for you to hear it!
4. Schedule regular parent-kid dates. Go for a walk together. Play a game, just the two of you. Go out for dessert with just one kid. Ask your child what they would like to do during this special time, when it will be just the two of you.
5. Remind your child that even when you have been distracted or misunderstand them, God is always ready and willing to hear everything all that your child will pour out in prayer.