

## Active Listening for Parents

Active listening is a good way to improve your communication with your child. It lets your child know you are interested in what she has to say.

To practice active listening:

- give your full attention to your child
- make eye contact and stop other things you are doing
- get down on your child's level
- and reflect or repeat back what she is saying and what she may be feeling to make sure you understand

It can be tempting to brush off our children's problems, especially if we have had a bad day or if we are busy. But our children need to know that we are going to listen to them. This will make it more likely our children will talk with us about their hopes and problems when they are older. Here is an example.

### Active Listening Example 1

Your child's football game is at 6:00. You only have a short time to make dinner, help with homework, and get everyone ready for the game. While the kids play, you quickly start making dinner. Soon, you hear your son crying. He comes and tells you that his brother hit him and called him a bad name. You are tempted to keep making dinner while nodding your head at what your child is saying, but then you decide to show him you are actively listening. You stop what you are doing, turn to him, make eye contact, and summarize what he has told you and how he seems to be feeling. You say, "It sounds like your brother made you feel sad when he hit you and said mean things." By doing this, you have let your child know that he has your full attention. He knows that his emotions and feelings are important to you.

Sometimes a child who is upset may not be able to name the emotion she is feeling. Active listening can be a great way to help her. Here is an example:

### Active Listening Example 2

You pick up your daughter from preschool. She is crying and tells you that her friend took her favourite toy and stuck out his tongue at her. You show her that you are actively listening when you say, "It seems like you are sad about your friend taking your favourite toy." Your daughter continues to cry and nods her head. She says that she thinks her friend will break the toy. You show her that you are still actively listening by saying, "So you are scared that your friend might break your toy." At this time, your daughter calms down a bit. You and your daughter continue to talk, and she knows that it is okay to be upset. She has begun to learn how to label and cope with her feelings by talking to someone.

## Using Reflections to Show You're Listening

Reflection is one way for you to show you are actively listening to your child. You can do this by repeating back what your child has said or by labelling and summing up how you think he feels.

### Reflections of Words

When you reflect your child's words, you are giving attention to him for his use of words. This increases the chance that your child will talk more because he wants your attention. You don't have to repeat exactly what your child said but what you say is usually very similar. You can add detail, shorten, or correct what your child has said. Here is an example:

Reflection Example

Child: "I drew some sghetti."

Parent Response: "You drew some long spaghetti."

In this example, the parent corrects the grammar, pronounces "spaghetti" for the child, and adds detail by describing the spaghetti as "long".

### Reflection of Emotions

When you reflect your child's emotions, you watch your child's behaviour and describe the emotions he seems to be having. This gives your child a word for the emotion and helps him learn that it is ok to talk about feelings. Reflection of emotions is not always easy. Here are some tips to make it easier:

- **Take a guess even if you are unsure.**  
There may be times when you are unsure what your child is feeling. For example, your child may be crying but you may not know if he is angry, scared, or sad. Let him know that you are paying attention by saying, "It seems like you are upset or "It sounds/looks like something is bothering you". Your child may not know himself what he is feeling and by talking you can figure it out together.
- **Words aren't needed all the time.**  
You can let your child know you are paying attention to how she feels by what you do even if you don't say anything. You can just sit with your child while she is upset or stay physically close and hold or comfort her.
- **You don't always have to agree.**  
Sometimes it is difficult to summarize or label your child's feelings because you think he should be responding in a different way. Telling your child to stop feeling a particular way does not show your child you are trying to understand how he feels. Help him deal with and understand his feelings, by talking with your child about his feelings.
- **Talk about other feelings.**  
Children may have several emotions at the same time. For example, your child might feel sad and afraid at the same time. Show your child you care about what she is

showing on the outside and may be feeling on the inside by talking about all the feelings.

- **Don't worry about getting it wrong.**

Sometimes when parents are learning active listening skills, they worry that they will incorrectly summarize and label their child's feelings. You should not worry. Children usually correct their parents if their feelings are described incorrectly. If your child corrects you, try again. Reflect what he has said to you, and expand on it to give him more words and to learn ways to describe his feelings.

Have questions? Need tips? Want to practice?

Check out [Quick Tips](#) and [Answers from Experts](#) for more info about active listening!

Click through the links below to watch videos and practice your skills for communicating with your child.

Watch Videos

- - [Play Time: Communicating with Your Child](#)
  - [How to Use Positive Communication](#)

Practice Skills

- [Communicating with Your Child: What Would You Do?](#)