

Why you should REALLY listen to your kids

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Today in "Parenting Weekends" we continue a series of excerpts from "Laying Down the Law: The 25 Laws of Parenting to Keep Your Kids on Track, Out of Trouble, and (Pretty Much) Under Control," the most recent book by "Today" show contributor Dr. Ruth Peters.

Law #16:

Shut Up and Listen

Here's how to set the stage for good communication, even if your kid seems to prefer to grunt rather than to converse. Watch for communication pitfalls, don't be a fixer — be an effective listener. This method helps your child open up and helps you avoid the most common mistakes of parent-child communication. And remember, once the communication with your child improves, all things are possible.

Have a kid living under your roof who seems unwilling or unable to tell you his concerns, worries, or even the daily goings-on? Well, join the pack of moms and dads who feel that they just can't seem to break into their kids' hearts and heads no matter what they try. And to make the situation even more puzzling, you may even have another child in the same house who babbles constantly about her feelings, what you've done to mess up her life, or the details of her friends' daily activities. Sometimes you wish that your budding talk show guest's chatter would somehow rub off on her more reticent brother!

Well, both styles can be fine, but each comes with pros and cons. You're never quite sure how to react when your talkative one has a meltdown — is she

really in a state of crisis or will she recover before dinnertime? But at least your daughter keeps you informed of her daily ups and downs so you can keep a finger on her emotional barometer. What about her brother, the kid who rarely shares his feelings and at times seems to have none, even when you know that his heart has been broken or his pride hurt? That's tough and it takes some savvy parenting to help the reticent communicator to open up.

Setting the Stage

There are some basic do's and don'ts for encouraging your kids to communicate with you. Set the stage for gaining your child's trust in confiding in you as early as possible. Habits begun at a young age are easier to form and have greater staying power. Try not to be critical when your child complains to you about a problem. If your initial impulse is to blame your son ("And what did you do to provoke Michael to hit you?"), he'll most likely think twice before sharing his problems with you again in the near future. Making assumptions like this can be off base and damaging to a relationship. Gather the facts before jumping to conclusions. By listening first, you're telling your child that you are on the same team and that you're there for him, although you may not always agree with his thoughts or actions.

Schedule time together. To encourage your kid to use you as a sounding board or a confidant, you need to have consistent private time with each other. I've found with my own kids that bedtime lends itself to introspection. It's a time to wrap up the day, both emotionally and physically, and if your evening routine contains this ritual, it becomes second nature to use it as talking time. I've also learned about my kids' feelings (sometimes more than I've wanted to) by taking walks with them. Strolling around the neighborhood can lead to quiet moments, mindless "weather talk," and even occasionally, shared confidences. Looking back, I wouldn't replace those moments with anything. So set up a routine that periodically places you alone with each child, be it driving to ballet or football, bedtime tuck-ins, or pounding the pavement together. You'll be pleased with how quickly the silence is broken and thoughts and confidences are shared!

Be especially sensitive during times when your child searches you out to talk. Even if your kids have the uncanny knack of uncorking their emotions in the middle of your important phone calls, take the time to listen. I know that it may be inconvenient to break from your thoughts or work in order to pay attention, but if you don't take advantage of the moment, you may not have it again.

Shut up and listen. Okay, now that you've set the stage for communication, you need to become a good listener if you want your children to confide in you. When it comes to kids' feelings, most of us have a tendency to jump in and try to fix things so that they are not uncomfortable, in emotional pain, or worried. When you rush to the rescue, though, your actions may be perceived by your child as, "I can't figure this out, so Mom has to do it," or "I shouldn't have to experience indecision or confusion. Dad's going to fix it." Wrong messages, folks — although your intentions are noble, you are depriving your child of learning how to deal with negative emotions or remedying the situation himself. Also, rushing in with a quick fix can be interpreted as trying to talk kids out of their true feelings, "You're overreacting — Jamie really didn't mean it that way!" Whether Jamie meant to hurt your child's feelings is not the issue — your kid's feelings are hurt, and that is what needs to be dealt with.

Once you've listened, help your child to accurately label his emotions. Most of us are adept at using psychological defense mechanisms to shield us from discomfort. For example, your son may come home from school and slam the door on his way to the bedroom. When you try to speak with him, he either grunts loudly or ignores you, or perhaps yells that he's madder than a hornet. However, what may really be happening is that he's embarrassed about missing an easy foul shot that could have clinched the game for his basketball team. Is he really angry? Yep, but the more basic emotions are humiliation, embarrassment, and fear that he won't be a starter in tomorrow's game. Help him to sort out the difference between his surface feelings (anger and frustration) and those at the core of the problem (concern

over what his coach and teammates feel about him). Helping your child to label and interpret emotions will ensure that he's working on the true problem.

Now that you've listened and labeled, it's time for problem resolution. Notice that I didn't say "problem solving," as there may not be an acceptable solution for every predicament. Sometimes kids just have to learn to accept frustration and to move on, and at other times they'll learn to agree to disagree. Start by letting your child know that her feelings are normal. In fact, you may remember feeling the same way yourself when it seemed that the entire class was invited to a birthday party and you were left out. Reflecting, or mirroring, your child's feelings will validate that it's okay to feel hurt, angry, or left out when you've been snubbed or rejected by others.

Help your child to develop options and alternatives for handling the problem situation — jumpstart the creative process by sharing an idea or two. However, giving a list of 10 possible responses that your teenage daughter can use to heal a rift with her friends is inappropriate — one or two should grease the wheel. Let her do the rest of the idea-producing, otherwise she'll forever be dependent upon you or others for generating solutions.

Ensure future communication. I teach two techniques to my clients that go a long way toward cementing their children's trust in communication. First, parents should clarify that even if the confidence shared is a 'fessing up to an inappropriate behavior (breaking a vase, sneaking out at night, using the phone when grounded), that they are proud of their child for telling the truth. Let your kid know that you respect her courage for coming clean, and even though there may be a consequence for the misdeed, it will certainly be less than if you had found out about it on your own!

Be a good confidant yourself. When your child tells you a secret or shares feelings that are touchy, keep it to yourself. Don't be a gossip and let slip your son's crush on the gal sitting next to him in geometry class or your

daughter's dream to be an astronaut. If the child asks you to keep the information to yourself, that's exactly what you must do, no matter how cute it is or how much Grandma would be tickled. Trust is too easily broken and so tough to attain. Getting your kids to confide in you is tricky business, but if you are sensitive and patient, they'll learn to trust your heart and your judgment!

Living the Law

Promote communication. Tell your children that you enjoy hearing what's going on in their lives and that you feel that it's important to establish good communication within the home.

Be especially sensitive with reticent kids. If your child tends to keep things to herself, assure her that you can keep a secret, especially if she tells you that it's a sensitive topic. If so, keep your word and keep your mouth zipped!

Don't jump in to fix problems. Many times children just need to air their feelings or to vent frustrations — they don't necessarily want your advice. Often, only time will fix it, but while your child is waiting, it may help to vent, to get some emotional validation, or to just touch base with a parent about feelings, both negative and positive.

Model good communication skills yourself. Tell your children about some of your problems — but be selective. Perhaps discuss your frustration about an annoying coworker or a difficult decision that you're going to have to make in the near future. Let them see that gathering other people's opinions and ideas may be very helpful and can enable you to better put things into perspective. Hopefully they'll see the connection to sharing their own problems and decisions with you.

Set the stage. Try to have some alone time with each of the children every day. Take their individual natures into account — some like to talk in the

morning on the way to school, whereas others are more relaxed and communicative at night, just before bedtime.

Make sure that one child doesn't consistently communicate for the other. The more verbal kid needs to learn to respect the quieter child's reticence and to be patient and tolerant with the challenges he may feel in terms of communication. Applaud your talkative one's concern, but ask that she allow her sibling to do his own communicating.

Promote good listening skills in your kids. If your child is very verbal and communicates feelings readily, help her to be a good listener. Teach that it's better to let others finish their sentences and thoughts, to shy away from being too judgmental, and to learn to keep confidences if they want to become good confidants themselves!

NEXT WEEK: Don't try to reason with the unreasonable

Dr. Peters is a clinical psychologist and regular contributor to "Today." For more information you can visit her Web site at . Copyright ©2004 by Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D. All rights reserved.

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