

How to Really Listen to Your Child

<https://www.strong4life.com/en/parenting/communication/how-to-really-listen-to-your-child>

There's no question that the middle school and high school years are tough. Social challenges follow kids home on their phones; academic pressure can be intense; and scary issues such as gun violence are all over the news. You might talk with your child about their feelings but are you really listening?

You may be surprised to know that a lot of middle schoolers don't confide in their parents and they don't think their parents are listening when they do. One middle schooler said they wished their parents would start "listening to my thoughts and feelings instead of interrupting and saying it's not that big of a deal." Another said, "I want them to listen to what I'm saying, not just tell me to suck it up and say 'you're fine.'"

When your child is ready to talk, here's how to give them the attention they need.

- Pay attention to nonverbal communication
- Don't force your child to talk
- Offering help
- Engage in active listening

Engage in Active Listening

It's important to show your child that you are listening so that they feel heard:

- Put your phone down and make eye contact.
- Take the conversation slowly, letting your child's words sink in.
- Offer what's called a "reflection statement." Repeat back exactly what your child said without twisting or trying to interpret their words. This shows you are paying attention.
- Try not to downplay your child's concerns. Instead of, "Oh, you'll do fine on that test," say, "You sound stressed about your test. Math is really hard. What can I do to help?"
- Above all, don't judge. "If you're reflecting back what you hear, it doesn't necessarily mean you agree or you like it," says Jody Baumstein, a licensed therapist with Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life. "You are trying to develop a sense of

empathy so your child can walk away knowing, ‘My parent understood where I am coming from.’”

Being an active listener doesn’t mean you can’t talk yourself, but being patient and present shows your child that you really care what they have to say.

Pay attention to nonverbal communication

Even when kids don’t want to talk, parents can still “listen.” Watch out for these types of nonverbal communication:

- Withdrawal, such as hiding out in their room or avoiding activities they usually enjoy.
- Tearfulness, extreme moodiness or other attitude changes.
- Complaining of constant stomachaches or headaches, without a known medical cause.
- Student and teacher talking at school.

Don’t force your child to talk

How do you draw out kids who won’t talk? First off, “Don’t try to force them to talk to you. That can backfire and make them even more resistant. Instead, use other ways to get them to open up,” says Baumstein. Perhaps there’s another trusted adult—a coach or teacher—you can suggest they go to. Remind them there are lots of ways to express emotion, such as drawing, dancing, writing songs or journaling. Post a list of different coping skills where your child can see it. “I always encourage parents to say, ‘When you’re ready to talk, I’m here. Of course if there’s a safety concern, it is important that we know,’” says licensed therapist Kathleen Hill. By letting your child know you’re there and being an active listener when they do want to talk, you’ll open the door for the next tough conversation.

Offering help

If your child is open and ready to talk, it’s best to ask for permission before sharing your thoughts. Asking things like, “Would it be helpful if I shared some of my ideas to help with this?” allows your child to decide if they would like to work together with you to help problem-solve. At the same time, asking your child how you can help is a great way to encourage independence while also supporting them. It is important to remember that once your child shares an idea of how you can be helpful, you should respect their wishes. Try not to overreact, and try not to overstep the boundaries that they shared. However, if your child is at a safety risk, let them know that you do have to take action to keep them safe.

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PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE FOR .5HR CREDIT

1. Short answer: When your child is ready to talk what are 4 ways you can give them the attention they need?
2. True or False: Putting your phone down and making eye contact helps a child feel heard.
3. Fill in the blank: Repeating back exactly what your child said is called a _____
4. True or false: Above all, don't judge
5. True or false: Being an active listener means you can't talk yourself
6. Fill in the blank : Being _____ and _____ shows your child that you really care with they have to say.
7. True or False: Complaining of constant stomachaches or headaches is a non verbal cue that parents need to pay attention to.
8. Short answer: according to the article how can you open the door for the next tough conversation? _____

9. True or false: its best to ask for permission before sharing your thoughts
10. Fill in the blank: if your child is at a _____ , let them know that you do have to take action to keep them safe.

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Answer Key

1. Short answer: When your child is ready to talk what are 4 ways you can give them the attention they need?
 - a. Pay attention to non-verbal communication
 - b. Don't force child to talk
 - c. Offering help
 - d. Engage in active listening
2. True or False: Putting your phone down and making eye contact helps a child feel heard.
3. Fill in the blank: Repeating back exactly what your child said is called a reflection statement.
4. True or false: Above all, don't judge.
5. True or false: Being an active listener means you can't talk yourself.
6. Fill in the blank: Being patient and present shows your child that you really care about what they have to say.
7. True or False: Complaining of constant stomachaches or headaches is a non-verbal cue that parents need to pay attention to.
8. Short answer: according to the article how can you open the door for the next tough conversation? By letting your child know you're there and being in active listener when they do want to talk.
9. True or false: its best to ask for permission before sharing your thoughts
10. Fill in the blank: if your child is at a safety risk, let them know that you do have to take action to keep them safe.