

How to listen actively to your children

Kids need to feel heard. Sometimes it may be difficult to hear what they have to say. Other times it may be hard to get them to talk about their thoughts at all. They may think you won't understand. They may be afraid to share their feelings because they think someone may make fun of them.

If you practise being open and honest with your children and make it easy for them to talk to you, you will build a stronger relationship with them. This process works in two ways: hearing what your children are saying and talking about your own thoughts and feelings with them.

Four ways to improve communication with your kids:

- Ask open-ended questions, such as “Tell me about your day” or “What did you do today?” These allow your children to tell you about what’s happening in their lives. These questions also require more than a one-word answer.
- Listen reflectively. You can do this by simply repeating what your children have said or by saying it back to them in your own words. This will make sure that you truly understand what your children are trying to tell you.
- Affirm your children’s feelings. This makes children feel supported and will make it easier for them to talk to you in the future. An example of this would be: “I understand that it must have been hard for you to come to me about this. I really appreciate your openness.”
- Summarize what you’ve heard. This reinforces what your children have said and shows that you have been listening to them.

Also, keep in mind that there are non-verbal ways of communicating that can also help with open communication. Making eye contact and nodding your head while they are talking are effective ways of helping your children feel heard.

Some tips for listening and understanding:

- It is important to listen to both the spoken word and the unspoken feelings. For example, if your child says “I hate my friends and never want to see them again,” the unspoken feelings might be hurt, loneliness or rejection. These feelings may be what your child is really trying to communicate. Encourage them to talk about their feelings by leading with statements like “you must be feeling sad” or “how did you feel when he said that?”
- Avoid judgment. If your child knows they can talk to you about their feelings without you saying “Oh – that’s silly” or getting angry, they’ll be more likely to open up and let you into their world.
- Use phrases like “tell me more” and show them you really want to know about what is important to them.

Actively listening to your kids can take a lot of practice. The rewards of open communication include identifying problems while they are small and getting to know your child as a person. For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

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