

## Skills for Good Parenting: Elementary Ages - Active Listening

It's easy to miss out on the important things when you are busy getting your family's dinner on the table, helping with homework or making sure your child has what they need for their extra-curricular activity. At times, children are telling us things and we just go through the motions of hearing, but we're not really listening. When this occurs we can miss little cues that tell us how they are doing and how they are feeling.

Think about a conversation where you felt the person you were speaking with really listened to what you were saying. It's likely the person was using some of these active listening techniques and that is what made you feel heard and understood:

- Making eye contact
- Being attentive
- Having an open mind
- Listening to what the person is saying and picture it
- Not interrupting
- Asking questions to help better understand the situation
- Empathizing with the speaker.

Listening and hearing your child is crucial to her development - When your child is sharing a part of her day with you, it's because she wants you to hear about it. You need to let her know that she is being heard, and using active listening skills will do just that. When children know they are being heard, this provides them with a sense of security and lets them know they matter to you.

In elementary school, active listening skills reinforce language development. Use body language and minimal encouragers like "mm hmm" and "go on." When your child is speaking to you, you want to restate what they're saying or summarize what they've said.

**Validation** shows that you understand what is going on for a person and as children mature it becomes more important. **It doesn't mean that you agree with the behavior**, but it shows that you understand where they're coming from. If your child is disappointed when you don't let them go on a sleepover on a school night, a validating statement would be "I understand that you are disappointed not to be able to sleepover at your friend's house, I'm sorry but our family has a rule of no sleepovers on a school night." You are validating their frustration, and at the same time showing that your actions are based on the rules and boundaries that you, as a parent, have set for the family

You can use **I statements** to model appropriate language. For example, "I felt hurt when you slammed the door after we argued." Or "I am sad when I hear you say mean things to your little sister."

**Ask open-ended questions** that require more than a yes or no response to engage your maturing child in dialogue. Don't just ask if they had a good day at school, instead ask "Tell me what you did in science class today."

**Expressing empathy** is also important. If your child seems unhappy when they get off the school bus, you can say "It looks to me like something is bothering you." Follow your child's lead and ask follow up questions.

Over time, using these techniques will help develop your family's listening "muscle."

Be the best listener you can be – it will promote good communication and understanding within your family. Active listening is not only about paying attention, it is about engaging in dialogue and one important pay-off is deeper and richer family relationships.

SDJ 8/13/18