

## Skills for Good Parenting: Middle School Age Track 4 - 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. Older children are less likely to open up to their parents at all. The times that they do - and the opportunities those conversations present - are precious. As a parent, you should be attuned to when your child opens up to you. Hold yourself ready and be prepared. If you just go through the motions of listening, your child will know; more importantly, you will be missing a window into their world. Sometimes the best conversations happen when something other than the conversation is the primary focus. For example, many parents find that their children this age are much more talkative when being driven in the car.

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.

However, some of these suggestions for active listening may not work for middle school children. Pre-teens are often more comfortable opening up when there is no eye contact. And when you are empathizing with them, you don't want to overdo it; you should show that you appreciate how they are feeling, but not necessarily feeling the same thing. Pay attention to how your child responds, both positively and negatively. If you have a conversation where you strike out getting your pre-teen to engage, step back and think about what didn't work. Next time, try a different approach.

With middle school aged children, you want to let them say their piece. While you want to show that you are listening by using body language and minimal encouragers like "mm hmm" and "go on," you don't want to give them impression that you know what they are going to say. Especially when talking about something difficult, you should try to summarize what you have heard them say to you, to demonstrate that you have actually heard them.

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

**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 to a friend's house when you haven't spoken to the other parent ahead of time, a validating statement would be "I understand that you are angry that I am calling your friend's

parent, but our rule is that you can only go to someone's house if I have spoken to the parent ahead of time." You are validating their frustration, and at the same time showing that your actions are based on the rules and boundaries you, as a parent, have set for the family. Beginning in middle school, it is important not only to validate your child's feelings, but to help them understand the complexities of communication. You are applying a rule that your child already knows, and not acting arbitrarily to prevent them from being with their friends. Communications become more nuanced at this age.

You can use **I statements** to model appropriate language. For example, "I feel hurt when you slammed the door after we argued." Or "I am glad that you explained how you feel, even if I don't agree with everything that you said."

Remember to use **open ended questions** that require more than a yes or no response to engage your pre-teen. Don't just ask if they had a good day at school, instead ask "Tell me what you did in science class today." You can show that you respect their opinions and ideas by asking them what they think about something they care about. With this age, you need to tread carefully so as not to appear to be over-reacting. Your pre-teen will remember, even if you don't, and will be less likely to open up to you in the future. The trick here, as a parent, is to balance not judging what your child is telling you with helping them to not to make bad choices.

**Expressing empathy** is also important. If your child seems unhappy when he gets off the school bus, you can say "It looks like something is bothering you." Follow your child's lead. If he doesn't seem to want to talk at that moment, limit your comments to expressing care and concern and an offer to talk about it when and if he wants to talk. And if something came up when you were both in the car the previous week, you can circle back, which reinforces that you were really paying attention.

Be the best listener you can be to help 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.

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