



Talk Less, Listen More

When I asked one of my elementary students what he didn't like about his life he told me that it was when people started to sound like blah-blah-blah.

Too often our good intentions of telling our children what to do, how to do it, where to do it, when to do, and why to do begin to sound like unintelligible garble. In the process we get tuned out, sometimes for life.

One of Stephen Covey's seven habits of highly effective people is "seek first to understand and then to be understood." Too often we want our children to understand us first, and we stop there, never trying to see from their point of view.

What do we do too many times when we try to listen and understand our children's behavior?

Instead of listening for understanding we offer advice. We give our opinion. We tell a story of how we went through a situation that was even worse. We blame. We insult. We criticize. We punish. We make judgments and diagnose. We interject our own needs, emotions and values into the scenario.

In the process, we block and most likely destroy any opportunity for true listening. All our children need is for us to listen to them without judging, criticizing, complaining or evaluating.

Our children want us to be interested in them. Conversely, when it is our turn to talk, we want to be listened to in a way that makes us feel understood. We have to prime the pump.

Asking questions is our most effective way to talk less and listen more. As a listener we need to be calm enough to be able to hear and to process what we are being told. We don't have to own the problem (at least not at the time of our listening). As we listen, we refrain from advising or defending our point of view. As a listener we provide a safe environment for our children to

speak. We seek to understand and ask questions to clarify our perceptions.

A simple technique to help us avoid the pitfalls of judging, criticizing, complaining or evaluating is to *only ask questions*.

Asking question after question with no statements helps us sidestep those listening obstacles. Also, if we sit kindly and patiently waiting for an answer we provide that safe environment.

Our session might go something like this:

Why did you hit your brother? I was bored.

Why did you choose to be bored? I dunno.

Do you realize you have a choice about how you treat other people? Yes.

Would you tell me why you would choose to hit your brother instead of doing something else? I guess I just wanted to have him do something with me. I was bored.

Can you think of how you might have gotten your brother to do something with you? All I really needed to do was ask him. I guess I just hit him so he wouldn't be able to say no. If I hit him he'd hit me back and then we'd be doing something together.

What do you think you can do in the future to get your brother's attention? I can just ask him to do something with me. And if he says no, I can ask him why.

Do you have anything you'd like to ask me?

Are you beginning to see how a few questions might be a way to help our children effectively learn another way of behaving?