

# PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Young people are frequently criticized for spending time on their smartphones even in social situations where they should be interacting with others around them. Yet I know that I'm finding it easier and easier to do this too. These articles are a good reminder of the importance of developing and maintaining good listening skills in ourselves so that we can model those skills for our children.

—Nicole Balza

## HOW CAN WE MODEL GOOD LISTENING SKILLS FOR OUR KIDS?

AS A WORKING mother with three children, I empathize with the struggle between balancing work responsibilities and family life. As a marriage and family therapist, I also understand the importance of regular family communication. So when my high school football player comes home from practice, I make sure to stop and ask him how his day was, even though my computer is still open, work is waiting, and I'm secretly watching for e-mail notifications. He typically says everything is fine, school was okay, and then proceeds to carbo-load. I reassure myself that I stopped working long enough to talk to him and he responded . . . family communication accomplished! I rationalize my behaviors by reminding myself that he is a teenage boy and probably doesn't have much to say to his mother anyway.

Parents, the truth is our actions really do speak louder than words. Even though I stopped to talk to my son, he was very aware that I was not fully present or ready to listen to anything important.

A few days later, my son came home while my husband and I were cooking dinner. Once again, I asked him how his day was. His response spoke volumes. "Well," he said, "since I can see both of you aren't very busy, I wanted to talk about something." He noticed that because we weren't distracted by work or our smartphones, we appeared to be more available.

So how can we as parents be better listeners for our children? How can we model for our children how to be good listeners to others? While there are entire books and courses devoted to teaching listening skills, here are three easy-to-remember principles, the ABCs of good listening.

**A is for availability.** In a July 2020 report from the Pew Research Center, approximately 70 percent of

parents reported being somewhat distracted by their smartphones when spending time with their children. How often are we talking face-to-face with our spouse or a friend and find ourselves distracted by the text message on our smartwatch or what our neighbors just posted on Facebook? Being available means making yourself mentally and physically available to listen. Close the computer, turn to whom you are speaking with, and be fully present. Being available means making time to listen, clearing away distractions, and preparing your mind and body to engage with another person. Work will always be there. Dishes and chores will always be there. That specific moment when your child wants or needs to tell you something may not always be there. Be available to listen.

**B is for listening behaviors.** Body language and behavior are the nuts and bolts of communication. Ask yourself, "Does my body language exhibit a listening attitude? Is my face relaxed? Is my tone calm? Am I tense? Am I glancing at a screen or my smartphone? Am I doing three things at once? Am I fully present in this moment?" Take notice of your body language at your next important company meeting or parent-

### HAVE PARENTING QUESTIONS?

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teacher's conference. You will likely notice that you are paying careful attention to the speaker, maintaining good eye contact, and perhaps asking follow-up questions. Now ask yourself if this is the same way you interact with your children.

**C is for commitment.** When was the last time you wrote down a personal goal and committed to it? I mean, really committed. You probably read about why this goal was important, and you kept yourself accountable, continuing to work on it until you achieved your goal. What if you committed to improving your communication with your children and spouse? While reading an article in a Christian magazine is a positive first step, what would commitment to good listening really look like in your home? It would most likely require daily practice, daily commitment, and an evaluation by asking yourself, "Is this working? How can I improve?" Perhaps you read another article about listening. Perhaps you ask a friend or your spouse to provide feedback about your listening skills. Ask them what you did that was helpful and what you might improve on. While this is difficult, it also demonstrates a serious commitment to good listening.

Why is listening so important for our children and family life? God tells us, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19). Parents, don't just ask your child a question and check a box that you communicated today. Follow the ABCs of good listening and commit to improving communication in your family.



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**LISTENING HAS** long been considered the key to effective communication. Scripture reminds us, "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19).

#### THE REALITY BECAUSE OF SIN

However, when your child comes home after curfew without a good explanation, sometimes the anger comes a bit quicker than the ability to listen. Yet listening is one of the most selfless acts of love we can offer to one another—especially our children. In moments of great turmoil, it helps to remember God's words in Philippians: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not



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looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (2:3-5).

Think back to any recent conversation with your child. As you heard the words he spoke, were you already preparing your comeback, explanation, or rebuttal? Or were you humbly slowing down, setting aside your need to get your point across, and starting out by reflecting an understanding that you heard him correctly?

Most certainly we are enmeshed in our brokenness, and it shows itself quite naturally in our communication. We tend to approach communication with a selfish goal of getting what we want—not giving to others what they need. Imagine if the focus and goal of your communication are to first give your son a sense that you understand him and the reasons for his choices—joining him in identifying not only the facts of what happened but also the feelings that impacted those decisions.

#### THE SOLUTION BECAUSE OF THE GOSPEL

Perhaps our ability to listen might best flow after first hearing the words of the gospel where we see the "mindset" of Christ Jesus, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8).

As a reflection of our love for the selfless act of our Savior, we have the opportunity to bring a humble and selfless attitude into our communication with our kids, setting aside our goals in the conversation and first working to reflect our understanding and love for them. The secret to being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to becoming angry can be found only in hearts that know the example of our Savior and his selfless act of love for us.



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