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Learning to Listen.

Encouraging your child to open up to you can be tricky. Psychologist Nicole Pierotti has these handy hints.

I often hear parents commenting that they ask their child how their day was at school and 'okay' is the only answer they get. That's it, end of conversation. They would like to know more about what happened or how they really feel about their friends. With a few simple and highly effective strategies it's possible to have more open communication. Our children want to tell us about their lives and feelings and they do try. The trick is communicating with them in a way that encourages them to talk more. Here's what you need to do:

Listen with your full attention: Stop cleaning or cooking dinner and really listen. It's much easier for your child to tell you their problems if they're sure you're really listening.

Resist the urge to give advice: Trying to solve your child's problem with an immediate solution is very tempting. Your child says "I'm tired" and you naturally reply "well, lie down and rest". Instead of giving advice simply acknowledge their feelings. "Oh you're tired. I see..." Words like these are an open invitation for your child to tell you what's on their mind.

Give your child's feelings a name: Heard any of these lately, "I don't like the new baby" or "I hate Grandma". What do you say? Usually something like "come on, I know you love the baby" or "you should only say nice things about people". This is typical of how most parents respond but it's denying your child's feelings. Instead try giving your child's feelings a name. For example, if your child says "I hate Grandma" you could say "so you're feeling annoyed with Grandma". If you name what feeling your child is experiencing they find it comforting and the feeling fades.

Give them their wishes as a fantasy: When our children want something they can't have, we usually respond with a long logical explanation of why they can't have it. Often the more we explain, the harder they protest. A different response is to give your child their wishes in fantasy form. For example, if they say "I want to go on a holiday" ask them where they'd like to go and add to it. Exaggerate and make the fantasy grand. Sometimes just having someone understand how much you want something makes all the difference.



Your attitude when employing these strategies is the key to their success. If it's forced or you're not 100 per cent interested your child may not take you seriously. Put yourself in their shoes. Think of how you feel when you're upset. Do you want someone giving you advice or asking lots of questions – this probably only makes you more defensive. Now think of how you feel when someone really listens and gives you a chance to talk more about what's bothering you. Don't you feel less confused and more able to cope with your problem? It's the same for our children.

Children can help themselves if they have someone who listens and responds empathically. Empathy doesn't come naturally for many of us, especially those who grew up having their feelings denied. The good news is, all it takes is practice. Luckily there is no end of occasions to practice these positive techniques with our children.

WRITE TO DUO If you have a topic you'd like DUO's child psychologist to discuss, email Nicole Pierotti at babysmiles@bigpond.com