

A word about “*active listening*” and why it is so important...

First of all, what is “active listening”? Without looking up a formal definition in a textbook, let me just say that “active listening” means listening to someone so that they *really know that they have been heard*. Well, what does that mean? *Really hearing* someone means more than being able to repeat back to them what they said. If you can only repeat back to someone exactly what they said all it really means is that your ears work! ☹ The truth is, people hear each other talk all the time, but how often do we really *hear* someone and how often do we feel *heard* by others?

Think about when you have a problem that you need to talk to someone about. Maybe you try two or three people who “lend an ear” but don’t really seem to get what you’re trying to say. But when you try that fourth person you think, “Now that person really heard me... they understand what I’m trying to say and how I’m feeling about the situation.” What was so different about this fourth person? Hopefully you were able to guess... “they understood what I’m trying to say and how I’m feeling”.

Really hearing someone means that you try to understand how they are feeling and communicate that to them...

Let me give you an example where a child you know has a problem... he goes to four people who don’t seem to “get it” and then he talks to a fifth person and FINALLY he feels heard... Let’s say that this child lives with his father who has legal custody. He is upset because his mother keeps saying she will come and get him for a weekend pass, but continues to not show up... The child goes to an uncle and says: “Man – my mom didn’t show up again this weekend. It’s the third time in a row.”

The uncle responds: “Well, you know son when I was a boy and my mama let me down I used to go to the fishing pond. Did I ever tell you about the two foot bass I caught there?... blah, blah, blah...”

How is the child likely to feel in this situation? Probably BORED out of his mind! Not to mention unimportant, mad, hurt, etc. The uncle didn’t listen to the child. It may be the uncle’s intention to try to take the child’s mind off the situation, but that is not what the child needed...

A neighbor, when approached by the same boy, responds “Why – that b--- -! She should never have had kids in the first place! I can’t believe she would do that to you. She is really a worthless excuse for a mother!”

How is the child going to feel after hearing this? WORSE! He doesn’t want to hear about how lousy his mother is. Regardless of what she’s done, he loves his mother and will probably start making excuses for her...

An aunt says to the boy, “I wouldn’t come and get you either. You really messed up when you were living with her. She probably won’t ever come to pick you up for the weekend”.

Well – you can imagine how much worse the child would feel after this... even if it were true and there might be a valid message in there somewhere, there is DEFINITELY a better way to help the child take accountability for his behavior and to explore the consequences of that behavior.

A teacher says to the boy, “Well, what you need to do is go call her up and give her a piece of your mind. She doesn’t deserve a son like you”.

Same thing – he doesn’t feel heard and this person is also talking badly about his mother.

*Finally, a cousin says to the boy after being told “Man – my mom didn’t show up again this weekend. It’s the third time in a row.”: **“Wow. You sound really hurt and angry. This has been going on for a while now”.***

FINALLY, the boy has been HEARD! This cousin simply “fed back” to the boy how he must be feeling. THAT is exactly what the boy needed – someone to know, to hear, and to try to understand how he is feeling. What he DOESN’T need is:

- *someone to criticize his parent*
 - *someone to talk about themselves in an irrelevant way*
 - *someone to tell him what to do*
 - *someone to act like the situation isn’t so bad – because in his eyes it is*
- The ONLY response in this example that would even open the door for a conversation would be the response from the cousin. This is the only person who used “Active Listening” – they listened in such a way and responded in such a way that the boy knew he had been understood – his feelings were acknowledged and respected.*

Too often we fall into the trap of wanting to be The Hero. We want to impart all of our wisdom and knowledge to others when they mostly just want to be heard and understood. When a person wants to talk to you, *they usually really don’t want to hear your voice much... they want to talk ... they want to be heard... they want to be understood. **REMEMBER that we have TWO EARS and ONE MOUTH because we need to do twice as much listening as we do talking.** ☺*

PRACTICE “feeding back” to the residents what you hear them say in terms of feelings...

Some examples:

A child comes home from school and tells you about the entire class getting into trouble. He says, “It’s horrible that I had to get a consequence with the rest of class when I didn’t do anything” (Skip the lecture, the advice, the explanation of group consequences,

etc.). A GOOD, active listening response would be “You sound like you feel as though you were treated unfairly”. STOP THERE. This will open the door to a discussion!

A child says, “The teacher called me a smarty pants today”. A good response would be “It sounds like your feelings were hurt by that remark”. STOP! Let them continue. If you were wrong – they’ll let you know. They may say, “No – it made me mad... I don’t like to be called names”. Then you can say something like, “Yeah – I can understand being mad.”. PERIOD. Let the conversation just happen. All you really need to do is rephrase what they say, inserting accurate FEELING words.

As simple as this sounds, it DOES require EFFORT and it DOES require PRACTICE. It is also worth it! It works with residents, co-workers, your own children, spouses, parents, bosses, etc.

Of course, active listening requires that we really WANT to hear the person talking to us, that we ACCEPT the person and his/her feelings, and that we are willing to put our own needs (our need to be liked by that person, our need to be right and smart in the other person’s eyes, our need to feel important, our need to feel special or like The Hero) aside.

Think about what that person needs and be there for them! Listen to what they are trying to say – listen between the lines – for the feelings. Let them know you hear them and care about them by telling them what you hear them saying – using feeling words. The conversation will move from there as long as you keep telling them what you hear them saying, focusing on how they must be feeling!