

# Reflective Listening for Parents

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Parents want to do the best for their children, so they try to boost “self-esteem” with positive comments. However, in their attempt to help their child avoid negative feelings, parents may actually be helping create insecurity, lack of autonomy, and low self-worth.

To illustrate what most parents do, here is one scenario of a typical parent/child conversation:

Mom: “What a beautiful picture you drew in school today.”

Child: “Well, I think it sucks.”

Mom: “No, it’s great. Look at the pretty colors! And the people you drew are so nice.”

Child: “Mom, it sucks. I hate it. I hate drawing.”

Mom: “Don’t say that. You don’t hate drawing. You are a good artist. Look at this nice picture you drew. We have so many pictures that you drew that are so nice.”

Child: “Mom, I told you it sucks. I hate drawing. I’m never going to draw again.”

Normal parenting, right? You told the child that he was worthwhile, right? You said his painting was good. You were supportive of the child, building his self-esteem, and reinforcing his talents, right? Unfortunately, this may not be what the child is experiencing.

Instead, this conversation taught the child:

- his opinions and feelings don’t matter
- the opinions of others are more important
- adults don’t listen to his concerns or ask how he feels
- talking about feelings is wrong and scary and vulnerable
- admitting faults, insecurities or vulnerability is wrong and scary
- his “self” isn’t real, important and worthy
- relationships are about being judged and found unworthy

Clearly, these are not the lessons parents are intending, but these conversations, over time, can build a sense of shame and emotional immaturity... all from a simple conversation about a painting in the first grade. These types of conversations happen every day between parents and children, reinforcing these negative lessons endlessly.

I find that parents spend far too much time lecturing, offering solutions, inserting their opinions, and urging correct behaviors. They spend very little time actually listening, being emotionally attuned and present, and allowing a child to experience his own thoughts, feelings, reactions and beliefs.

Parents should use a simple technique called “Reflective Listening.” Reflective listening involves the extremely simple idea of repeating back what the other person says. With reflective listening, the conversation above would go something like this:

Mom: “Looks like you have something there in your hand from school.”

Child: “Yeah, I drew this picture, but it sucks.”

Mom: "Oh, you think this painting isn't very good."

Child: "Yeah, it sucks. I hate it. I hate drawing."

Mom: "You really, really don't like drawing or this picture."

Child: "No. Hate it. Everyone draws better than me."

Mom: "Ah. You feel like everyone else in class can draw better than you do."

Child: "Yeah, and Miss Smith didn't say she liked my drawing."

Mom: "Oh, so it didn't feel good when Miss Smith ignored your drawing. It seems to me like you look angry."

Child: "Well, maybe a little."

Mom: "And sad, too?"

Notice that his thoughts and feelings were not contradicted or overridden by the mother's opinions. Notice also that the conversation went deeper and deeper into the real source of his feelings – that others are better and that the teacher's failure to praise his work felt hurtful. These are normal feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth that we all experience at times as children.

Notice that these are statements, not questions. Questions, especially "why" questions, can seem intrusive and shaming. Avoid asking questions. Besides, most parents have tried the question approach and gotten nowhere: "How was school today?" "Fine."

Ideally, reflective listening also leads the conversation to an emotion. Even if you have to guess, try to describe what your child is feeling: angry, sad, frustrated, upset, happy, etc. Honor those emotions and let the child see that it is OK to express and discuss emotions calmly. By staying calm and emotionally regulated during these discussions, you model this skill for your child. However, it is appropriate to use facial expressions and tone of voice that model the emotion you are labeling. It is also fine toward the end of the conversation to mention your feelings: "I feel sad that you believe no one likes you at school."

It can at first seem as if reflective listening might be boring and repetitive, but if done well, it can lead to many very positive outcomes for a child's emotional and social development:

- the child feels "heard" and his experience is honored
- the child is able to process his own feelings without the parent's solutions, direction, or opinions. This leads him to learn to self-regulate his emotions and problem solve.
- emotions are recognized and validated as real and not frightening to discuss
- the child's real opinions and "self" are honored and accepted as worthy and valued
- the child learns he is not alone with his feelings, which is frightening. He feels there is someone available to reassure him during strong emotions, which leads to a feeling of emotional safety, and reduces stress, anxiety and depression.
- the child learns that relationships have disagreements and strong emotions, yet can be "repaired"
- parents don't project as many of their fears, guilt, and concerns into the situation
- the child gets to set the emotional tone, not the parents

- the child learns not to defer to others' needs and opinions automatically, which improves his ability to be assertive and non-deferential in relationships.
- the child is the focus, not the parents' emotional issues and fears. Those parental fears can be thoughts such as: "My child must be a good artist. My child must feel good about himself right now and at every moment or I have failed as a parent. I have to ensure that my child is happy." These underlying and unacknowledged beliefs and fears often get in the way of authentically attuning to a child.
- the relationship between the child and parent is safe and accepting, rather than feeling unsafe and judgmental to the child. The relationship becomes closer, with improved communication and emotional intimacy.

Parents often find it very difficult to stop their normal conversation style and use reflective listening. They automatically go into "parent" mode – trying to mold and change their child to match the parent's opinion of how the child should behave. Remember that children come into the world as good, thoughtful, caring people. It is only when parents stop listening and override the child's natural instincts that the rebellion and arguing become a significant problem.

Many parents fear that if their child is being angry and saying hurtful things, that reflective listening will encourage more of the same. On the contrary, children who are listened to with empathy are more respectful and easier to discipline. Children become oppositional because they do not feel accepted and empathized with. Go ahead and reflect the child's anger or annoyance. His feelings will be heard and honored, he will learn that you accept his feelings and he will learn to then accept his own range of feelings. This will lead to improved self-regulation and a reduction in his defiant behavior.

***Focusing only on obeying rules communicates to a child that you only care about rules, not his or her feelings. Consider: How do YOU feel when someone doesn't care about YOUR feelings?***

For a week, watch what percentage of time you actually listen to your child's concerns versus instantly offering your own opinion.

Also think about how you were parented as a child. Did your parents listen to you and encourage you to express your feelings and thoughts? Or did they spend a large amount of time judging, correcting and disciplining? What did you feel or do or think when they dismissed your feelings or when they spent time listening?

When you are ready, start trying to use Reflective Listening when it is appropriate. You won't use it for every conversation!

Note: For families with children who are already extremely oppositional and defiant, reflective listening may seem as if it is "too little, too late." But it also might be worth a try, because the communication patterns of the family clearly are not working now.

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Some phrases to help out:

Rather than offer a solution, ask: "What do you think you can do?" "What can you try out?" "What might you say?" "How do you think he'll react when you say that?"

If the child asks for your opinion, ask: "What do you think you should do?"

Some tips:

1. Slow down — talk more slowly, slow down your movements, get face-to-face with the child.
2. Talk less. Allow silence — a space for emotions to be experienced non-verbally.
3. Really look at your child and be attuned to her emotions, body language, tone of voice — not just the words being said.
4. Use a calming tone of voice, soften your facial expression, and try to use “prosodic” speaking style — a “musical” tone of voice that accurately matches and conveys emotion. This is not just “sing-song” speaking or “happy talk.”

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### **Another Example of Reflective Listening**

*Excerpt from: “Attachment-Focused Family Therapy” by Daniel A. Hughes, (p. 145-6)*

Eleven-year-old John came home from school, quickly changed his clothes and was in the process of running out of the house to spend time with his friends. His mother knew that the family was going to her sister’s house for the evening and John would not have time to do his homework later. She told him that he could not go outside because of his homework, but he yelled and continued toward the door.

#### Example of Use of Reinforcement (Inappropriate) Discipline:

Mom: John, you get back here. You have to do your homework first!

John: No, mom, I really want to see my friends!

Mom: No, your homework must get done now.

John: I’m not going to do it now!

Mom: (a negative reinforcement option): John, you are going to do it or you will not be allowed to play with your friends for two days. OR

Mom: (a positive reinforcement option): John, you have to do it now. If you get it done, I’ll let you spend some extra time with them tomorrow.

John. I hate this stupid homework. And I don’t want to go to Aunt Jean’s.

Mom: Get started now, and stop complaining, and you’ll be able to see them tomorrow.

#### Example of Use of Appropriate Discipline:

Mom: Wait, John. You won’t have time to get your homework done later because we are going to Aunt Jean’s house.

John: No, mom, I really want to see my friends!

Mom: I can see that son. I know that they’re important to you and you haven’t seen them all day.

John: I haven’t mom! I just want to see them!

Mom: I know you do. I know how important they are to you. And right now getting your homework done probably does not seem nearly as important. You probably would like to say, “Who cares about the dumb homework... and Aunt Jean’s house. I don’t want to go anyway.”

John: I don't care about homework and I don't want to go.

Mom: I can understand, John. You have a great time with your friends, and not seeing them because of homework and Aunt Jean probably does not seem fair.

John: It doesn't, mom!

Mom: I wouldn't have seemed fair to me either when I was your age. I'm sorry that it is working out this way today.

John: Ah, sometimes things suck.

Mom: And I think this is one of those times for you.

These differences in words are likely to be reflective of what are more pervasive differences in general patterns of perception and involvement between John and his mother. When a parent focuses on reinforcement as the primary means of influencing children, the focus is on behavior, not his experience, and he is less likely to feel understood and less likely to believe that his thoughts and feelings matter. With her eyes on his behavior she is less likely to know how important his friends are to him, and to be sensitive to his thoughts and feelings during the act of discipline. She is also less likely to see the need to repair any breaks in their relationship due to the act of discipline."

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## **Authenticity**

A major reason reflective listening is effective is it acknowledges the child's feelings as authentic. This excellent blog post explains other ways parents can communicate authentically with children.

by Sanam Pejuhesh, "Play Therapy Daily"

Imagine this: you and your child walk by a neighbor who is aggressively yelling at his family; even you are terrified. But then you tell your child, "It's okay, everything is fine!" Your child doesn't feel as if everything is fine and so your appraisal creates conflict with her experience. Your inauthenticity makes her doubt her evaluation, and can help her internalize a sense of mistrust in herself, her judgment and her environment. She can form a mis-association between a deep sense of confusion and fear, and things being "fine".

When inauthenticity takes place repeatedly, children learn that their feelings are not trustworthy, because mommy or daddy expresses such different feelings. She will stay in a subtle state of stress and this dysregulation makes it difficult to relate, learn, focus, set boundaries and express herself. She will not know that it is safe to feel because no one ever taught her that.

On the other hand, a child who is met with authenticity by a parent or therapist understands that humans have feelings and this is okay. Because she has experienced alignment of energy, words, body language and behavior from her caretakers, she trusts in her environment. As such, she knows how to express herself in a way that honors the truth of who she is and the boundaries she has. Because she trusts herself and values her own opinions, she can stand up for herself and have deep compassion for others. She feels safe allowing her radiance and her light to beam through her by way of words, deeds, relationships and more.

Do you remember being the child in this scenario? It isn't always easy to be authentic as an adult, is it? But it is essential if we want to raise our children in this conscious, loving, truthful way. So we

do our own work. We set out on a journey to reclaim the parts of ourselves that were devalued or confused by our parents' inauthenticity. We allow our children to see us doing this and we include them on this path.

<http://www.playtherapydaily.com/therapist-parent-authenticity-creates-confidence-kids/#more-3336>

A good article to read: [http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2015/04/13/the-benefits-of-helping-preschoolers-understand-and-discuss-their-emotions/?utm\\_source=facebook.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=npr&utm\\_term=nprnews&utm\\_content=20150417](http://ww2.kqed.org/mindshift/2015/04/13/the-benefits-of-helping-preschoolers-understand-and-discuss-their-emotions/?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20150417)

**Recommended Book:** *Between Parent and Child*, by Haim Ginott and Alice Ginott

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