

Nourish your Child with the Gift of Listening

Rafael Richman, Ph.D.

When you and your child interact, what often happens is that your child communicates or conveys a message to you, and in response feels partially heard, or does not feel heard at all. For instance, your child's message may be to express an idea, a thought, or a feeling-emotion, to you, and your response may be to problem-solve and to give a solution or to provide parental advice and wisdom to him.

One consequence of this "dance" is that your child may have a sense of not being heard and understood. He may experience this as an empty feeling. For your child this may also be accompanied by a vague unsatisfied sense. This empty and unsatisfied feeling may be outside of your child's conscious awareness and is often very subtle. In families where these poor communicating patterns occur repeatedly, children may get used to not feeling heard.

A deep human need is not being fulfilled. A consequence of this is that your child may end up feeling frustrated. If this feeling unheard happens a lot, he may also feel invisible, unloved, unimportant, alone, and insecure. Your child may sense that it is not safe for him to express his feelings.

Children cope with this lack of being heard and their corresponding feelings in different ways. Children who are still developing their verbal skills or who have difficulty with knowing, labeling, and communicating their feelings, may resort to indirect strategies for getting across their inner experience. Shutting-down and keeping their feelings to themselves is one possible action. "Turning up the volume" is another. While the former action may manifest as the child "going quiet" and not verbalizing, the latter may manifest more externally and noisily as crying, temper-tantrum-ing, screaming, nagging, acting out, or any number of behaviors.

As an adult and a parent you are able to turn to friends, close family, or your spouse to vent your feelings, to talk, and to feel witnessed

and heard. If you are able to recall an instance when you experienced feeling really and truly heard and understood, you most likely felt positive about this interaction. Truly being heard feels satisfying, complete, and feeds the soul. Some adults and parents seek a professional ear [counselor, doctor, psychologist, rabbi] as a means to feel heard and to fulfill this need.

Feeling heard and understood is often accompanied by a sense of clarity. People who talk and feel heard are often better able to sort out what is going on for themselves, what is important to them, and what they are thinking and feeling. This ideally enables them to move on. Feeling heard can provide the opportunity to get unstuck and to allow for movement and action. It can be energizing, enlivening, and motivating.

A classic example in parent-child interacting can be used to illustrate this point. Suppose a child falls and lightly hurts himself, and then, crying, approaches his parent. The child may wish to let his parent know that he fell and that he is experiencing some degree of pain. In the perfect world, the parent would validate and empathize with her child's feelings of pain, the child would feel heard, stop crying, and then run off to continue playing. In a non-perfect world, the parent would respond to her child by getting frustrated, angry, or by being non-attentive to the child's message. In this scenario the child may feel worse, continue to cry, and may feel irritated and annoyed.

In the perfect world scenario, the parent nourishes the child by responding in an attuned, empathic, and genuine way to the child's experience. The child then is often able to move on to their next activity. Parents living in the real and non-perfect world, however, may be tired, busy with other kids or people, self-absorbed in another task or activity, distracted, overwhelmed, preoccupied with their thoughts, or perhaps engrossed in their own strong feelings. For whatever reason, parents may be unable to and unavailable to witness and to listen to the child in that moment.

Expect that this will happen. Expect that there will be many occasions where you will not really listen to your child. You may be

relieved to know that the next opportunity to correct this "error" will arrive soon. We can also think about this as opportunities to do t'shuvah for a het [sin; going off the mark]. G-d continually provides us with chances to correct our path, and to get us back on the mark and back on track.

The unfortunate truth is that it is often incredibly difficult to really listen to others who are closest to us; and this includes our children. It can be easier to listen to and to respond positively to a stranger or a casual acquaintance. It is less likely that these individuals are setting off all of our reactive triggers and pushing our buttons. It is easier to listen to someone when we are not as invested in the relationship.

The choice to improve listening habits is yours. If you decide to pursue this path, expect that changing the dynamics and the interaction patterns between you and your children will require ongoing work, conscious effort, and continuous practice. Active and sincere listening is a skill. Unpracticed skills get rusty. Your child deserves to be nourished. Are you willing to work at de-rusting your listening habits?

Children long to experience being understood, being heard, and being truly seen by their parents. Opportunities for you to provide this gift to your child arise each and every moment.

Strive to increase the nourishing responses and to decrease the non-nourishing responses to your children. Modifying this nourishing to non-nourishing ratio, I believe, is a do-able, reasonable, and worthy endeavor. Practical ways to implement this idea will be described in upcoming articles.

It may be worthwhile for you to take a moment and reflect on the following:

When you "listen" to someone [your child] are you truly listening to him? Are you truly present and "with" him?

Is it hard for you to hear your child? Do your own thoughts, feelings,

and reactions get in the way? Do you find yourself reacting [e.g., getting angry, frustrated, impatient] to what he is saying?

When you "listen" to someone [your child] are you thinking ahead to what you will say next, in response to his comment? Are you truly listening or are you more invested in working hard to get your own point across?