

Listening & Being Heard

Listening – it sound's easy, but is it really?

At Babiesknow we focus on developing deep lasting caring relationships between parents and children, between partners and with the wider world. At the core of healthy and joyous relationships is an ability to listen.

What is listening?

At first glance we may think that listening is easy: we hear what the other person says. But do we really hear what they are saying? Are we preparing our reply before they've finished talking, or making assumptions about what they are going to say next? Are we being impatient, critical or judgemental? Are we sometimes not even interested in the other's experience or point of view?

To truly listen, especially to our babies and young children we need to be quiet in ourselves, curious and interested, listening generously with an open heart and mind. In his book *Magical Parent Magical Child*, Joseph Chiltern Pearce says "If we are preoccupied with our agenda, that is what we will hear. Rather than hearing, feeling and understanding who the child is in this moment, we will be, quietly or not, comparing the child's experience with our preconceptions. We will not hear what is."

Listening in pregnancy

Listening to your child begins with conception as you experience the changes in your body, then that first flutter of feeling your baby move, to stronger movements as they grow. Inside your womb, your baby listens too. Hearing is well developed by 20 weeks gestation, and babies hear all the many sounds in the mother's body, including the beat of her heart and the sound of her voice. By 22 weeks babies respond to sounds from outside the womb, including dad's voice and the music mum is listening to.

Listening to your baby by noticing kicking and strong movements will give you an indication of his or her patterns of rest and activity, and unusual movements may indicate stress. Responding to your baby, by taking steps to reduce your stress level for instance, will lower the level of stress hormone cortisol that can be damaging to your baby's delicate developing system. Taking time

each day to tune in and acknowledge and welcome your son or daughter builds your relationship and supports secure bonding at birth.

Learning in early life: listening, the brain, and early relationships

We learn who we are through being in relationship with those close to us. In the process of listening, when there is eye contact and focused attention between you and your child, specialised cells called mirror neurones fire in your brains so that, completely unconsciously, you mirror one another. For instance, your mouth may move as your baby's does, you may frown or open your eyes wide depending on the way your baby looks at you. Most mirroring is beyond awareness, but our brains are doing it all the time; all the signals they pick up are relevant and mirroring helps us to really feel into one another.

When your child sees his feelings reflected in your face it helps him to make sense of what's happening; it shows him his feelings are real and valuable; and it's a powerful element of bonding. Feeling heard is part of the wider picture of feeling accepted and loved, and learning to trust. Feeling heard is an important part of feeling safe, and this in itself supports comfort, confidence and learning. The opposite, feeling ignored and unsafe, triggers a range of anxiety and survival systems in the body and brain that are not conducive to confidence or to learning, and do not support bonding.

Babies and children are learning moment to moment, and feeling heard supports them as they learn about themselves and the world. As Alison Gopnik points out in her book *The Philosophical Baby*, where she explores the development of the brain in babyhood, babies are constantly doing stats and evaluating their experience to make sense of it. Inside the brain, neural networks are forming between brain cells. These networks are like maps: they are formed according to a baby's experience, and will guide behaviour in relationships both in infancy, and later in life. While each individual baby will have his or her own spirit and unique experience of relationships, parents and carers have the greatest influence on the environment their child experiences.

Listening when you don't agree; and when you can't listen

Listening to your baby or child entails making a space to tune into their world, and their experience with sensitivity, wonderment and interest. Listening does not mean agreeing with everything that is said, it is acknowledging the other's reality. The opportunity will follow for you to speak from your experience. There will also be many times when you are unable to listen, this is best handled by being truthful "I know you want to tell me something, but just now I cannot listen properly to you as I have to finish cooking dinner, I will listen to you fully in a short while". Be honest and do remember to fulfill promises.

Did you feel heard as a child?

Those of us who have not been listened to as children may have poor listening skills as adults. This can show up as being unable to really hear our children or we may go to the opposite extreme and hang on our child's every word and not listen to ourselves, and our own needs. The latter can lead to becoming resentful of our children as we move too far out of our own comfort zone to ensure that our children are heard.

Listening to our baby's or child's big feelings can be especially challenging if we have not made peace with our own. So many of us have had to repress our strong feelings as they may have been unacceptable in our family of origin, and we may have learned not to express them in order to stay in relationship with our parents.

We are born with strong emotional drives and they are an important part of our survival and our expression of who we are. When babies are upset, parents often shush them. In fact, what a baby may actually need is for mum or dad to tune in, listen, and reflect what's happening: 'I hear how upset you are, I am not sure what you need just now and I am here to protect and take care of you.' Naming with respect what you think your baby or child is feeling helps them to feel seen and heard, and allows their nervous system to settle. This supports them to be able to stay connected to their deeper feelings and feel loved and accepted for who they are, whatever they are feeling.

An exercise in listening

As with every other aspect of parenting, finding support is immensely useful when it comes to listening. One way to do this is to set time aside at least once a week with your partner or a friend where you can each listen and be listened to. Decide on the time available, divide it equally and then each person takes a turn to speak while the other just listens. This is not a dialogue: the listener is there to listen and to tune in, fully, without judgement, criticism or questions and won't respond or ask questions or speak at all. This is a chance for both of you to express yourselves, and to experience being heard; and, as listeners, to experience open-hearted listening without any need to 'fix'.

The surprising aspect of this exercise is that we often come to our own answers once we have the opportunity to express ourselves fully in the presence of a supportive listener. It is the same with children: when children are upset, simply listening and acknowledging their upset allows them to resolve it themselves. We can offer to help, but the greater gift is just to listen.

Listening and keeping the boundaries - a practical example

How to listen and at the same time hold boundaries is an everyday practical aspect of parenting. Firstly, bear in mind that all behaviour is driven by what a person needs. Your child's behaviour is his or her best effort to let you know how they feel and what they need. Understanding this is a useful first step that can open a parent to deeper listening, helping him or her become less

defensive or reactive, and more receptive to the true message underlying a child's behaviour or words. It is useful to listen with all of our senses, not just our ears.

A typical scenario of not listening goes like this:

Parent "It's bed time"

Child "I don't want to go to bed"

Parent "But you are tired and have to go to bed"

Child "I am not tired"

Parent "Yes you are, it is late"

Child "I am not tired"

Parent "I know you are and you have to go to bed now"

Child "No"

With good listening skills, the scenario could go like this.

Parent "It is getting late and it is time to go to bed in a few minutes."

Child "I don't want to go to bed"

Parent (Taking time to assess what the child's feelings and needs are) "You are having fun playing and you are not ready to stop"

Child "Yes and I am not tired"

Parent "You don't feel tired and you want to finish your game"

Child "Yes"

Parent "Can I tell you why I want you to go to bed now?"

Child "OK"

Parent "It has been a long day for me, I am tired and I need for us to keep to your bedtime and I want some time to myself. Would you like to take a couple of toys upstairs to your bedroom?"

Child "In a minute"

Parent "Can we agree five minutes?"

Child "OK"

When we come into relationship with our children and listen to them and speak up for ourselves, the energy changes; children feel more connected and are generally more co-operative.

On each of our courses you will have the opportunity to practice listening skills and there is a chance to apply them to every age, from newborn baby to your adult relationships.