Listening to children

Improving communication with your child
“Spend time with your child whenever you can. One-to-one time together with you will make him feel special and let him know he’s important to you.”

Dr Richard C. Woolfson, child psychologist

“Before I tuck the children into bed, we have a 10-minute ‘worry time’ chat. They look forward to telling me all about their day, including the good bits as well as any problems.”

Jo, mum of Chloe, 9, and Bethany, 6
Children can’t always put their feelings into words, so listening to them includes paying attention to their actions and behaviour.

Listening is about two-way communication between you and your child, with each of you valuing and respecting the views of the other.

Children who are listened to are usually well adjusted and self-confident, while those whose needs are ignored may be withdrawn or difficult and suffer from low self-esteem.

Parents who cannot communicate well with their children are more likely to resort to smacking and hitting in moments of frustration. Communicating with your child is also vital in preventing child abuse, including providing your child with information on keeping safe, and being there to offer help and protection.

We’ve collected the best advice from professionals, as well as some top tips from parents, to help you communicate with your child, whatever their age.

To make for easier reading, this booklet refers to children as he or him, and she or her in alternating sections. All the information applies equally to boys and girls.

For more advice... ...on listening to your child, visit www.yourfamily.org.uk
You can start listening to your baby from the very beginning. Smiling, stroking, cuddling, talking to your baby and making eye contact are all ways of communicating.

From the very first day after birth, your baby will be listening to you and in a few weeks you will be rewarded by smiles and those first cooing sounds — your baby is talking to you.

Of course, crying is a very important part of your baby’s language too. If your baby still cries after you have done all the obvious checks — for hunger and thirst, wind, changing nappies, not being too hot or too cold, or even just bored with their own company — you might begin to feel desperate.

“T’ve read to my baby since he was a few months old. He loves listening to me doing different voices, actions and songs, and he tries to turn the pages! My six-year-old is brilliant at reading but still loves us to read to him.”

Sonia, mum of Louis, 6, and Frankie, 13 months

Remember
- Crying is perfectly normal behaviour for a new baby. In the first few months of life, a baby spends on average at least two hours in every 24-hour period crying.
- Crying is meant to be a sound that parents find difficult to ignore. This is nature’s way of ensuring that your baby’s needs are met.
- Crying is neither your fault nor your baby’s, and things will get better later on.

Find out more
Cry-sis
Provides support and advice regarding excessively crying or sleepless babies.
www.cry-sis.org.uk
08451 228 669
Did you know?
Your baby can recognise you and your partner’s voice soon after birth. This is because, while in the womb, your baby will have heard you talking and so your voices will be familiar as soon as she is born.

If you run out of patience, remember that being angry with your baby will only make the crying worse. You don’t need to be ashamed of your feelings – most parents feel angry with their children at some time. Go off and cool down, or take your anger out on the cushions or have a good cry yourself. Go back and deal with your baby once you feel calm again. If your baby cries persistently, ask your health visitor for advice or ring a helpline like Cry-sis.

Tips to help you cope with crying

- Rock your baby in a pram or cradle or try going on a car ride; as these can often work like magic.
- Walk up and down with him or try carrying him close to you in a sling.
- Sing or talk gently to him, or try playing a tape of womb sounds or gentle music as this can sometimes help very young babies.
- Some babies find the sound of white noise, such as a vacuum cleaner or washing machine, soothing.
- Try swaddling – wrapping your baby very firmly inside a light shawl. This gives some babies the secure feeling of being back in the womb.
- Don’t be too quick to put your baby back in his cot if he begins to calm down.
- If your baby is very keen on sucking and you’re sure he’s not hungry or thirsty, you may want to try a dummy, but make sure it’s clean and never dip it into anything sweet.
- Cuddling your baby is usually the best tip of all, if you can relax and don’t feel too tense, you are the best comfort your baby can have.
Give children choices to help them feel listened to: “Do you want to wear the blue or pink socks today?”

Listening as your child grows up

Children learn to talk by listening to adults speaking directly to them. By the time your child is three or four and has mastered quite a lot of language, she will want to practise it as much as possible, and will use it to learn about the rest of her world. This may mean endless chattering and “why?” questions. Try to listen and answer as patiently as you can.

- Fit listening easily into your daily routine
  Talk about the things you see when you are on the bus, walking to the shops, at the supermarket or during bath time. You could sing or recite a nursery rhyme to your baby when changing her nappy, or read a book together.

- Give plenty of encouragement
  When your child is learning to talk, they will probably use funny words of their own and are bound to get some words mixed up. “I shower Rafi with praise whenever he gets words
right. It is a great confidence-booster and praise works better than criticism!” Shobha, mum of Rafi, 3

- **Try to answer all of your child’s questions**
  As your child listens to you and looks to you, they build up a picture of themselves. “I used to tell my son ‘not now’ or ‘go away’ when I was too tired to answer his questions, then I realised that I wasn’t helping him to learn. Reminding myself of this now makes it easier to cope and my son remembers all of my answers!” Nicola, mum of Kieron, 8

- **Look out for warning signs**
  If your child seems unhappy or reluctant to talk, it might be a sign that something is wrong. It might be that she feels you are not interested in what she is saying, or wants to tell you something that she finds difficult to explain. Ensure that you make opportunities for conversation, preferably when your child is not overtired from a long day at school.

- **Spend some time reading with your child**
  This helps improve both her listening and her language skills, and will give you both a starting point to talk about your child’s thoughts and feelings.

- **Set aside some special listening time**
  “If you’re busy or too tired, it can be hard to make time to listen to your child. You might find it easier to set aside a special part of the day, such as just before your child goes to bed. You need to be flexible though. Sometimes small children just can’t wait to talk about something that is important to them.”
  Eileen Hayes, NSPCC parenting advisor

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Visit your local library
Reading out aloud is great for your relationship with your child. Why not try visiting your local library and choosing some books that you and your child can read together?
Listening to older children

Most of the tips about listening to younger children apply to older children too, but older children also have their own different needs.

Being a parent to teenagers can be a challenging, worrying and sometimes distressing time. While your teenager is pushing for independence, you can feel rejected, criticised and confused. Here are some tips to help you through.

- **Make it clear that you want to be involved**
  If you find that your child never wants to talk to you about anything, you may need to work really hard at it. A good start is to make it clear that you are interested in them and in what they do.

- **Respect your child’s views**
  Don’t expect him to like everything you like or agree with everything you say. The teenage years are a time of testing out opinions and people, including parents. Your teenage child is more likely to respect your views if you respect his views too.

- **Let your child know you’re there for them**
  Older children need to learn how to live without the constant support of their parents, but they still need you. However independent your children seem, let them know that you’ll always be there to offer comfort and support.

- **Remember what it’s like to be a teenager**
  The teen years can be a trying time, both for parents and for children. Teenagers may behave like an adult one minute and like a toddler the next.

- **Respect your child’s privacy**
  Older children particularly need privacy. They need their own space, time to themselves, and the right not to communicate about certain areas of their lives, for example their personal relationships. If you respect their privacy, they are more likely to confide in you.

- **Don’t impose your ideas**
  It is fine to state that you have different views, and your teenager still needs you to be clear about acceptable limits to their behaviour. However, imposing all your attitudes, or trying to force him to agree with your point of view, will only make things worse.
Get help if you need it

If you are worried that your child has a particular problem – for example problems at school or with friends, such as bullying, relationships, being the victim of racist attitudes, or a problem with drugs or alcohol – you may need to get professional advice. Some of the organisations listed in the section on special difficulties in this booklet might be able to help.

“Think back to when you were a teenager. That can help you see your child’s point of view.”