Listening to children
A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

NSPCC
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.
Why a guide on listening from the NSPCC?

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) exists to prevent child abuse. Our work to protect children includes providing advice, information and support to parents and carers.

Here are some of the reasons why it is important that parents and carers listen carefully to children:

- Parents who cannot communicate well with their children are more likely to resort to smacking and hitting in moments of frustration.

- A child who is never listened to properly grows up feeling that the important adults in his life are not interested in him. A child who feels like this may suffer from low self-esteem.

- Communicating with your child is vital in preventing child abuse. This includes providing your child with information on keeping safe, listening carefully to what your child tells you and being there to offer help and protection.

- Being listened to and communicated with are basic needs of your child. The trust that develops between parents and children through listening means that children are more likely to go to their parents when they are unhappy or in trouble.

You can lead the way by showing that you listen. Don’t be afraid of showing affection to your children in public, or showing others that you like and listen to your children. This will help create a society where children really matter, and where they are seen and heard.

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.

Inside this booklet …

Why listening is important 3
Listening to your baby 4
Listening as your child grows up 6
Listening to older children 8
Some talking and listening tips 10
Parents talk about listening 12
Improving family communication 14
Some special difficulties 16
Helpful organisations 18
The NSPCC FULL STOP Campaign 19

Why listening is important

Listening to your children means paying attention to what they say, and encouraging them to share their thoughts and feelings with you. It also means paying attention to their actions and behaviour, because children can’t always put their feelings into words.

Listening is important because it affects the way children see themselves. Children who are listened to are usually well adjusted and self-confident. Children who are ignored may be withdrawn or ‘difficult’ and, in extreme cases, might develop emotional scars that could last a lifetime.

Listening is about two-way communication between parents and children - each valuing and respecting the views of the other.

If we have children who are unhappy they may find it difficult to find the right words to tell us about this, but we will sense that something is wrong and will need to find a way of helping them express their feelings.

If we communicate more effectively with our children we should be able to understand their needs better and some of the stresses of parenthood can be reduced, or even avoided.

The trusting relationship that develops between parents and children also means that our children are more likely to come to us when they are unhappy or in trouble.

Children who are listened to are usually well adjusted and self-confident.
Listening to your baby

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 he is born, 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 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 - on hunger and thirst, wind, changing nappies, babies being hot or cold, or even just bored with their own company - you might begin to feel desperate. You could try some of the Coping with crying tips on the next page.

Remember that:

- 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 which parents find difficult to ignore. That is nature's way of ensuring that the baby's needs will be met.
- Crying is neither your fault nor your baby’s, and things will get better later on.

Coping with crying

You might find some of the following tips useful.

- Rock your baby in a pram or cradle.
- Walk up and down with him.
- Sing or talk gently to him.
- Carry your baby close to you in a sling.
- Play a tape of womb sounds or gentle music helps some very young babies.
- Some babies find the sound of 'white noise' like a vacuum cleaner or washing machine soothing.
- Car rides can work like magic.
- Swaddling - wrapping your baby very firmly inside a shawl - 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 is clean, and never dip it in 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.

You can communicate with your baby long before he starts to talk. Smiling, stroking, cuddling and talking to your baby and making eye contact all help.

If you get to the end of your 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 by having 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 (see page 18, under ‘Cry-sis Helpline’) or the NSPCC Child Protection Helpline (see back cover).
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 much as you can.

- Give plenty of encouragement
  When your child is learning to talk, she will probably use funny words of her own and is bound to get some words mixed up. Trying things out and making mistakes are important parts of learning. In the early stages, don’t correct her too much, and give her lots of praise for getting things right.

- Try to answer all your child’s questions
  Children can sometimes wear parents out with constant chattering and endless questions. You might find it easier to cope with this if you remember it is helping your child to learn. She will probably be happy with very simple answers to questions. Try not to brush her off with comments like ‘Because I said so.’

- 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. Make sure that you make opportunities for conversation, preferably when your child is not over-tired from a long day at school.

- Spend some time reading with your child
  This helps to improve both her listening and 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 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.

If you encourage your child to talk to you when she is young, she will learn that you are ready to listen. She will know that you care and will be much more likely to talk to you when she is older.
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. If you have teenagers, you may find the ideas on these pages helpful.

- **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.

- **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 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 teenagers still need you to be clear about acceptable limits to their behaviour. However, imposing all your attitudes, or trying to force teenagers 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 on page 18 might be able to help.