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Family Focus: Help Your Child Be a Good Listener

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this point I would want to chime in: "Well, I now have a headache from trying to get you to actually have a conversation with each other.")

Listening well to others is a skill and often requires parental coaching and reinforcement to really take root. Young children, age four and under, are naturally egocentric. In this developmental phase, a child views himself as the center of his world and everything revolves around him. Children at this stage have the tough job of learning to share their toys, take turns, and follow directions.

By age five, children can begin to experience the world through the eyes of another person and to display empathy. They are ready to learn and practice good listening skills. The earlier you start, the easier it will be to establish this behavior. Here is one suggestion for helping your child develop into a good listener:

Sit with your child or together as a family, with no distractions. Ask your child a question which will evoke feelings, i.e., "How are you feeling about Daniel and his family moving away?" When he says, "I'm sad" or "I miss them," you can reflect back and say, "I understand. I bet it's hard for you. Are you going to be in touch with him?"

Continue the conversation.

Then share with your child something that you're sad about (nothing involving him or anyone in the family), and ask him if he can say some words to help you. Thank him when he does and tell him his words helped you feel better.

Without making it too obvious what you are doing, practice this exercise over time using different emotions as a theme, including positive ones. Have him respond to your question while you listen. Then you can answer the

A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he gets to know something.

Wilson Mizner

US screenwriter (1876 - 1933)

A great deal is written about how adults and parents can be good listeners, but not so much about the importance of teaching children good conversational listening skills. This isn't the same as encouraging them to listen more carefully to their teachers and parents, although that, too, is important. Rather, it means helping them learn how to be active listeners with their peers and others. Etiquette classes for children are increasingly popular, but more important than teaching which fork to use is learning how to politely and cooperatively converse with others.

We all appreciate those who show interest in us and listen carefully to what we say. These people usually show they are paying attention by making eye contact with us while we are talking, asking us follow-up questions, and/or commenting on what we communicated. We refer to this as active listening. Active listeners share the stage with us instead of trying to monopolize it.

When I conducted social skills groups for elementary and middle school students, it was always a challenge to train them to listen to each other. In the beginning of these groups, conversations would tend to go like this:

Child A: "I just got a new video game for my birthday!"

Child B: "Well, I got \$40 from my uncle for my last birthday."

Child C: "My birthday is next month and I want a new bike."

(Add two or three more children's responses to this mix. At

same question while he listens to you. Some ideas could be a time he was proud of himself, what he did to help someone else, or how he got over being scared of something - the dentist, the dark, or a roller-coaster ride. Let your child know and practice how to respond in a caring way to what you or his siblings say. Be sure to reinforce this behavior by telling him how good it feels when he listens. Let him overhear you telling people what a good listener he is and how much you and others appreciate it. Catch him in the act as often as possible. Once the habit is established you only need to reinforce it occasionally. You can also have fun with your child by making jokes about listening. For example, if you are talking and he is not responding, you can throw out some key words such as "party" or "dog" or the name of his favorite video game. Then, when he finally tunes in, you can tell him you were only teasing so he would pay attention. Of course it helps if you can be a good listener yourself, so that you can serve as a model for your child. One of the many challenges of parenting is continually trying to improve ourselves so we can put our preaching into practice.

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