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Christine G. Moudry

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COMMUNICATION IDEALS AND PRACTICES
IN THE FAMILY:
HOW PARENTS LISTEN TO CHILDREN

Presented to the

Department of Communication Studies
and the

University Honors Program
Northern Illinois University - DeKalb

by

Christine G. Moudry

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How do parents listen to their children? What listening behaviors are practiced in the family? What is ideal communication between parents and children? An examination of the research and the instructional material for parents on listening to children reveals some general findings in this area. The majority of the literature focuses on the ideal listening behaviors for parents, rather than the listening behaviors that are actually taking place. These ideal listening behaviors are described in two types of sources. There are manuals for instructors to conduct parenting workshops and there are manuals for the parents themselves. In this context, listening refers to more than merely hearing someone. "Listening involves the processes of selecting, attending, understanding, and remembering."¹

The first group of literature consists of material for the instructors of parenting workshops. While some of these workshops focus on parenting skills in general, other workshops relate specifically to parent-child communication. In his training manual, Donald P. Riley explains the necessity for such workshops. "All communication skills are learned. How to talk and how to listen are skills that we learn beginning in early childhood and continue to learn throughout our lives."² Thus, if parents wish to improve their listening behaviors, they must learn how to do so. Riley's workshop models include a session on sensitive listening and responding.

Some workshop manuals include guidelines for instructors, but also include workbooks for parents. For instance, although

Richard Abidin looks at parenting skills in general, he does emphasize reflective listening in order to recognize a child's feelings.³ His workshops include a trainer's manual for the instructors and a workbook for the parents with exercises to complete at home.

In addition to these manuals, Marguerite Lyle discusses the instructions for workshops presented in the Louisiana area to teach listening skills to parents. "The workshops include a discussion of why parents listen poorly and then present specific ways to improve listening habits. For example, parents should "realize that listening takes real effort and listen between the lines to hear what is not being said."⁴ The workshops also include a listening survey so that parents can test their listening behaviors before and after the workshop. Thus, these communication workshops for parents set forth ideal listening behaviors as a goal to be reached. Completion of these workshops should lead to improved listening behavior for the parents.

The second, and larger, group of literature consists of material for parents to improve their listening skills on their own. This material focuses on different forms of "ideal listening" as well as different guidelines for improving listening behavior. There are three very practical sources aimed at parents. Perhaps the most practical of these is titled Parent Effectiveness Training. In this book, Dr. Gordon outlines in great detail the ideal of active listening.

In active listening, then, the receiver tries to understand what it is the sender is feeling or what his message means. Then he puts his understanding into his own words and feeds it back for the sender's verification. The receiver does not send a message of his own - such as an evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, analysis, or question. He feeds back only what he feels the sender's message meant - nothing more, nothing less.⁵

Parents are given very practical examples of how to apply their active listening skills in the family, even with children who are too young to talk. Dr. Gordon stresses the effects that active listening has on the parent-child relationship.

Another practical source for parents is a "how to" book in communication skills. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish set forth very ideal behaviors for parents in terms of communication with children.⁶ This book not only examines effective behaviors, but also examines the usual responses parents make to their children. It is one of the few sources that even mentions the listening behaviors that may currently be taking place.

In addition to these two sources, there is another training manual for parents. Louise Guerney examines parenting in general, but does include listening in order to show understanding. "You must want to listen to the child. You can't pretend to be a good listener."⁷ Guerney includes concrete examples of parent-child communication and specific rules to follow.

In general, the material for parents concerning their listening behaviors includes listening to children of all ages, even infants. However, there is some material that relates

specifically to listening to adolescents. Merton P. Strommen and A. Irene Strommen believe that "knowing how to really listen is the only way by which we can come to understand the person who is our child, regardless of his or her age."⁸ They set forth three important guidelines to help increase and encourage understanding in parent-adolescent relationships. In addition, they examine the three most common listening mistakes among parents: "listening with half an ear, 'yes, but' listening, and 'I can top that' listening."⁹

In addition to the material that deals specifically with improving parent-child communication, there is also material that relates to family communication in general. This material, however, is also practical for parents. Steven Beebe and John Masterson believe there is a "need for additional emphasis upon listening as an important communication skill. Particularly within the context of a family ... most of us would like to think that someone is listening to us."¹⁰ What applies to the family in general, also applies to parent-child relationships. Beebe and Masterson set forth specific guidelines on becoming a better listener and also stress empathic listening.

Likewise, Sven Wahlroos, in his book which contains twenty rules of family communication, examines the need to listen. "The crucial importance of listening is especially clear in child rearing. I would even go so far as to say that successful child rearing cannot be accomplished without it."¹¹ Rather than detailing specific guidelines, Wahlroos explains

listening in general terms. "Active listening implies an obvious interest in the partner's feelings and opinions as well as an active effort to hear and understand the partner."¹² Thus, most of the communication material for parents deals with specific guidelines to improve listening behavior. The importance of listening is stressed in parent-child relationships as well as in the family in general.

As mentioned previously, the majority of the literature concerning listening focuses on ideal listening behaviors, whether in instructor's manuals for workshops or in guidelines for parents themselves. There is hardly any literature which examines the actual listening behaviors of parents. Research in this area has not been conducted, perhaps due to the difficulty of gathering data. In order to gather information about parents' listening behavior, it would be necessary to study the parents and children in their natural home environment. This may not always be practical for research.

In addition, there is only one research study which actually examines the effects of listening on children. Peter Lloyd and Michael Beveridge found that an ideal listener improves children's performance as speakers.¹³ Perhaps there is little research in this area due to ethical reasons. It would be unethical for researchers to not listen to certain children in order to see the effects, because this may harm the emotional development of the children. As a result, the research into listening to children is very scarce compared to the instructional material for parents on listening to children.

What are the practical applications of these findings? How can parents use this material? These findings indicate that it is possible for parents to improve their listening skills if they desire to do so. Several parenting workshops are currently presented and many books are written specifically for parents. As mentioned throughout this paper, parents can apply this material in their everyday interactions with their children. The majority of the books contain examples of typical conversations and daily interactions between parents and children, which makes the material very applicable.

However, how important is it for parents to try to improve their listening skills? Although actual research on the effects of active listening has not been done, there are some speculations that can be made. As Dr. Gordon explains, active listening skills are important in parent-child relationships.

Active listening fosters a kind of catharsis in children ... helps children become less afraid of negative feelings ... promotes a relationship of warmth between parent and child ... facilitates problem-solving by the child ... influences the child to be more willing to listen to the parents' thoughts and ideas ... helps children to start thinking for themselves.¹⁴

The current literature for parents helps to foster these ideals of active listening. The benefits for the children are numerous. Parents who learn to listen also learn to recognize a child's feelings and to show understanding in the process.

In addition to the benefits for the children, there are also benefits for the parents. According to Beebe and

Masterson, "family members willing to listen empathically should develop more understanding of one another and also communicate with greater accuracy."¹⁵ Therefore, parents who improve their listening skills may improve many other areas of their lives and their children's lives as well.

Thus, an examination of the research and the instructional material for parents on listening to children reveals that there is a great deal of practical information for parents. This information deals specifically with guidelines to improve listening skills and communication with children. However, in order to truly examine the effects of this improved listening, research must be done in this area. Although it is not possible to determine how parents actually listen to their children, it is possible to determine, according to various sources, how they can or should listen to their children.

ENDNOTES

¹Steven A. Beebe and John T. Masterson, Family Talk: Interpersonal Communication in the Family (New York: Newberry Award Records, Inc., 1986), p. 206.

²Donald P. Riley, et al., Parent-Child Communication: Workshop Models for Family Life Education (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1977), p. 34.

³Richard H. Abidin, Parenting Skills: Trainer's Manual (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976), p. 33.

⁴Marguerite R. Lyle, "Teaching Listening Skills for Parents" (Paper presented to the Southern Speech Communication Association, 1983), p. 6.

⁵Dr. Thomas Gordon, Parent Effectiveness Training (New York: Peter H. Wyden, Inc., 1970), p. 53.

⁶Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 8.

⁷Louise F. Guernsey, Parenting: A Skills Training Manual (State College, PA: Institute for the Development of Emotional and Life Skills, 1980), p. 24.

⁸Merton P. Strommen and A. Irene Strommen, "How to Talk to Kids," Ladies Home Journal, March 1985, p. 144.

⁹Merton P. Strommen and A. Irene Strommen, Five Cries of Parents (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985), p. 60-62.

¹⁰Beebe and Masterson, p. 206.

ENDNOTES (CONT.)

¹¹Sven Wahlroos, Family Communication: A Guide to Emotional Health (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc., 1974), p. 214.

¹²Wahlroos, p. 214.

¹³Peter Lloyd and Michael Beveridge, Information and Meaning in Child Communication (London: Academic Press, Inc., 1981), p. 39.

¹⁴Gordon, p. 57-58.

¹⁵Beebe and Masterson, p. 219.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abidin, Richard B. Parenting Skills: Trainer's Manual.
New York: Human Sciences Press, 1976.

Guidelines for instructors to conduct parenting workshops. Stresses reflective listening and includes sample conversations.

Abidin, Richard B. Parenting Skills Workbook. New York:
Human Sciences Press, 1976.

Workbook for parents to use in parenting workshops. Presents practical examples and practice exercises to improve listening skills.

Beebe, Steven A. and John T. Masterson. Family Talk: Interpersonal Communication in the Family. New York:
Newberry Award Records, Inc., 1986.

Explains the need for better listening, mentions factors that interfere with listening, and presents guidelines to improve listening skills.

Bolton, Robert. People Skills. Englewood Cliffs, NJ:
Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979.

Guidelines to improve listening skills. Mentions the failure of parents to practice good listening habits and to model these habits to their children.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk. New York:
Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1980.

A practical book for parents who wish to improve communication with their children. Encourages listening in order to understand feelings.

Galvin, Kathleen M. and Bernard J. Brommel. Family Communication: Cohesion and Change. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1982.

Examines communication as the underlying foundation of the family and discusses the therapeutic function of listening to children.

Ginott, Dr. Haim G. Between Parent and Child. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965.

Discusses parenting in general, but sets the stage for more recent works dealing with communication and children.

Gordon, Dr. Thomas. Parent Effectiveness Training. New York: Peter H. Wyden, Inc., 1970.

An excellent source for parents to learn about active listening. Includes practical explanations, even for listening to children too young to talk.

Gordon, Dr. Thomas. P.E.T. in Action. New York: Wyden Books, 1976.

Continues Dr. Gordon's previous work. Includes a discussion of common problems in active listening as well as practical solutions. Details the results when parents are active listeners.

Guerney, Louise F. Parenting: A Skills Training Manual. State College, PA: Institute for the Development of Emotional and Life Skills, 1980.

Guidelines for parents in effective communication. Contains actual examples and exercises and encourages listening as a means of showing understanding.

Liss, Jerome. Family Talk. New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1972.

A collection of concrete examples of family life followed by brief explanations of parent-child interactions. Indirectly stresses the importance of listening.

Lloyd, Peter and Michael Beveridge. Information and Meaning in Child Communication. London: Academic Press, Inc., 1981.

Contains research studies including a study which stresses "the ideal situation of children communicating with adults." Finds a positive connection between having an ideal listener and children's performance as speakers.

Lyle, Marguerite R. (1983). "Teaching Listening Skills for Parents." Paper presented to the Southern Speech Communication Association.

A comprehensive look at workshops designed to teach parents how to listen to their children. Includes a listening survey parents can use to interpret their listening behaviors.

Morton, Caryl. (1985). "The Best Way to Talk to Kids." Parents, 60, 88-92.

Examines listening in terms of creating positive, encouraging relationships with children and stresses the importance of parents as listening role models.

Riley, Donald P., et al. Parent-Child Communication: Workshop Models for Family Life Education. New York: Family Service Association of America, 1977.

Presents models for instructors to use in workshops for parents. Includes handouts and practice exercises on sensitive listening and responding.

Schuman, Wendy. (1982). "How to Talk to Your Child." Parents, 57, 48-52.

Encourages the development of good communication skills with children. Stresses the importance of empathic listening and the use of empathic language to respond.

Strommen, Merton P. and A. Irene Strommen. Five Cries of Parents. San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985.

An excellent guide for parents of adolescents. Includes a discussion of several listening mistakes.

Strommen, Merton P. and A. Irene Strommen. (1985). "How to Talk to Kids." Ladies Home Journal, 102, 28.

Stresses that listening is the only way to understand children. Includes specific guidelines for listening to adolescents.

Thomson, Mary M. Talk It Out with Your Child. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1953.

Possibly the first book to stress parent-child communication. Alludes to the importance of parents listening, as well as talking.

Wahlroos, Sven. Family Communication: A Guide to Emotional Health. New York: Macmillan Publishing, Company, Inc., 1974.

Sets forth twenty rules for effective family communication and contends that successful child rearing is impossible without effective listening.