

Positive Parenting: Listening to Your Child, Listening to Your Partner, Listening to Yourself

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Authoritarian child rearing was effective in producing the assembly-line workers needed by an industrializing society. Times have changed. Now businesses want to hire flexible, creative, self-directing team players.

Families have also changed. Large farming families needed military-style discipline to keep everyone in line. In today's one or two-child families, parents can give attention to the unique personality of each child.

As we struggle for equality between men and women in relationships, we also look for ways in which children can be treated as persons with dignity and rights.

In the 1950s, psychologist Carl Rogers took a stand against the authoritarianism inherent in psychoanalytic and behavioral theories of psychotherapy and created "client-centered" psychotherapy. The therapist did not impose values or goals upon the client but acted only to facilitate the unfolding of each person's unique way of being in the world. Rogers later called his movement the "person-centered" approach, and it spread to education, childrearing, and peer self-help.

Rogers created "empathic listening." The therapist tried to hear the client as if standing in the client's shoes. He or she would then try to reflect back the client's own words such that the client could hear him or herself more clearly. The client continued clarifying and articulating his or her own vision until the words and images exactly fit inner experiencing. Just this -- finding exactly the right words or images for unclear body sensings or intuitions -- allowed the client to move forward, to become more clear about values, goals, and action steps.

Empathic listening became the basis of many self-help techniques, including the "active listening" of Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training*, and Faber & Mazlish's *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen, How To Listen So Kids Will Talk*.

Eugene Gendlin, a student of Rogers, discovered a further essential thing about human beings: they could only change, through therapy or through life experiences, if they were able to check with and refer to their present bodily "feel" of living in situations. He called this self-checking "focusing" and developed self-help and therapeutic techniques for teaching people this self-healing capacity (*Focusing*, Bantam, 1981).

"Child-centered" or "positive" parenting applies Listening and Focusing skills to raising children such that they do not lose the capacity for self-checking -- for articulating and being guided by their own unique vision and for taking responsibility for their own behavior. A three-prong approach is necessary: listening to your child, listening to your partner, and listening to your own Inner Child.

One: Listening to Your Child -- Positive Discipline

Instead of seeing children as monsters to be suppressed and controlled, Positive Parenting sees each child as born with innate tendencies toward cooperation and altruism and with a unique blueprint of skills and attributes to manifest in the world. Parents function as teachers, guiding children away from troublesome behaviors and toward appropriate ones and helping children to learn to solve their own problems. Putting themselves in the child's shoes, they try to see children as having no evil intentions but simply trying to manifest their unique inner blueprint. Instead of operating as Cops, parents become more like Luke Skywalker's mentor, Yoda, a guide.

As a parent, rather than using punishment to suppress "mistaken" behavior, you can teach positive behavior: "Oops! We don't write on the walls. Crayons are for paper. You can draw here." "Oops! If you throw sand in his eyes, it hurts. You can throw sand into this bucket." "Oops! If you pinch Mom, that hurts. Here's how to pat gently. Oh, that feels good."

Of course you would show a toddler with actions, not so many words, but the empathic listening attitude is there -- trusting that children are interested in cooperating, that they are simply experimenting and need to be taught. The emphasis is upon guiding toward adaptive behaviors, rather than upon suppressing negative ones.

Along with this, you can reflect or mirror to children their positive behaviors, helping them to build a positive self-image: "Wow, you're really helping." "I see you trying so hard." "You're really being brave." "I appreciate how you're cooperating." "Wow. You're really working on that drawing."

In situations where you must impose your will upon a child, you can still be empathic with and respect the child's feelings: "I'm sorry I have to put you in this car seat. I hear that makes you mad." "You're really sad that Mom has to leave you. I hear that but I have to go." "It really makes you mad that you can't have that candy." Such parenting encourages self-checking, or "focusing," helping children find words for emotions, validating rather than denying the child's experience of the situation.

You can also encourage self-checking by giving children choices whenever possible. Even from age one, you can say, "Do you want milk or juice?" "Do you want Cheerios or eggs?" "Do you want to walk or to be carried?" In order to choose, a child must check inside: "Hm. What do I want? Milk or juice?" Children who are encouraged to check inside grow up able to make responsible choices, to use inner checking as a rudder for their life course.

As children become more verbal, you can use Reflective Listening to help them figure out their own problems and feelings using Focusing, just as you might do empathic listening with an adult.

Two: Listening to Your Partner—Focusing Partnership and Interpersonal Focusing

The second equally important aspect of Positive Parenting is positive attention to the relationship between parenting partners. Confusion, dissatisfaction, and conflict between parenting adults washes over into relationships between parents and children. If needs are not being met with adult partners, adults inappropriately try to get these needs met through their children. If you want to parent well, put all the energy you can into creating good communication and intimacy with your co-parent. The strongest relationship needs

to be between the parenting partners, not between one parent and the child.

As parents, you can learn to exchange Listening/Focusing Partnership turns on a weekly basis, either with each other or with others in a Focusing Support Group. You can use these self-help peer counseling skills to work on your own Inner Child issues and to increase intimacy and support in your relationship. You can learn to use Interpersonal Focusing to sort through conflicts in parenting styles.

With the basic Listening/Focusing skills under your belt, and every day and weekly sharing to keep channels of communication open and intimacy alive, you will also be ready to use Interpersonal Focusing when serious parenting conflicts arise. If you belong to a Focusing Support Group, you can ask another group member to serve as a Listening Facilitator, if needed. Otherwise, you can take equal turns using Reflective Listening with each other.

Partners can take first five, then ten minute equal turns saying how they each experience a conflicted situation, the other partner simply saying back the words of the speaker. If speakers also try to "focus," to pay attention to and check the words with their inner sensing, they are more likely to begin to speak from the heart and to gain greater clarity about their own part in the interaction.

Three: Listening to Yourself --Inner Child Work

The third component of Positive Parenting is empathic listening attention toward yourself, or Intuitive Focusing. The situations with our children that "hook" us, that lead us to react irrationally, are those situations which stir up unmet needs and hurt feelings from our own childhood experiences. No amount of educational reading or good intentions can get you around these blind spots.

When you find yourself having repetitive, rigid emotional responses, or feeling confused and blocked, it's time to sit down and listen to yourself. Using Intuitive Focusing, you can check inwardly and ask yourself, "What's really going on for me here? Why does this have me so stuck?" and wait quietly for an intuitive "sense" of the issue, The Creative Edge, to form in the center of your body. Then you can carefully look for words and images that exactly capture the feel of this stuck place. You can also have an outside Reflective Listener using the Focusing Partnership method described above.

One metaphor for this type of empathic listening attitude toward yourself is nurturing your Inner Child. As you would listen empathically to a sad or hurt actual child, you can listen to the hurt and wounded parts of yourself. Healing these childhood wounds is another essential component for Positive Parenting. You cannot have clear space to place your attention upon hearing and supporting the uniqueness of your own children unless you are also meeting the needs of your Inner Child.

Update 2007: You can learn Listening/Focusing skills through the Self-Help Package available at Creative Edge Focusing™, www.cefocusing.com. Download exercises to practice at home and at work; find a Focusing teacher, join an e-support group. Visit Interest Area: Positive Parenting for more ideas and to join in interesting projects.