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# Are you a good listener?

## *The art of deep listening and why it matters to our kids.*

*“The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they bloom like flowers.” —Thich Nhat Hanh*

Most of us have had the experience of talking to someone who is listening, but not *really* listening—listening, but not *deeply* listening.

Deep listening is a sense of presence, inner stillness, openness, and mindful attention to what the other communicates in their body, speech, and silence. In parenting, deep listening helps us identify and respond sensitively to children’s needs.

Decades of evidence shows that attuned, sensitive, and emotionally available caregiving promotes children’s healthy development, secure attachment, and mental health. The founders of the Circle of Security program convey the feeling of listening deeply to one’s child in a simple phrase: **“I am here, and you are worth it.”** This is a powerful reminder to us as parents that our presence and attention can be instrumental in cultivating our child’s sense of self-worth and mental health. We have only to recall the last time that we felt truly listened to in order to conjure that same sense of worthiness. “Wow, my voice matters; I am someone worth listening to.”

Unfortunately, deep listening doesn’t come naturally to all of us. It may even seem counter-intuitive in our culture of quick fixes and endless scrolling for fast advice.

## Learning to Listen Deeply

So how do we practice the art of deep listening? Just as weight training helps us build and strengthen the muscles of our body, practicing deep listening builds and strengthens our capacity to listen. Every day we are presented with opportunities to practice being truly present with our families and connecting to their experience in a more powerful way. Here are some tips for building your deep listening “muscle”:

1. **Connect with yourself first.** One of the best ways to build our capacity to listen deeply to others is to practice slowing down, turning our attention inward, and being present with our own experience—with our own thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations. In other words, by listening deeply to ourselves and connecting with our own experience, it becomes easier to do so for others.

2. **Make time.** Deep listening requires our time. It may be helpful to build regular, intentional time into your schedule to truly be present with your loved ones.

For couples, this could be a once-a-week check-in in which you give each other space to discuss what is on your mind and in your heart, with an emphasis on connection over criticism.

For parents, the walk or drive home from school and mealtimes may be good opportunities to check in with your child and simply be present for whatever comes up.

Build a routine that works for you and your loved ones, whatever that looks like. The important thing is that we make time.

3. **Minimize distractions** (and put down your phone!). Many of us have become master multi-taskers, splitting our attention between multiple tasks and flicking between tabs on our screens. Deep listening can't be just another tab open; it requires our full mind and heart to show up. Even young children can tell when adults in their lives are distracted, and research shows that parents' increased distraction can take a toll on children's development. Therefore, it is important to minimize distractions during the time we devote to deep listening. This may mean putting down our phones, turning off the TV, and shutting down the computer; it may mean going someplace away from the hustle and bustle of the office or home. We don't have to sit in perfect stillness to listen deeply but limiting distractions can help create the conditions for our minds to settle and be fully present.
4. **Notice the urge to move away** (interrupt, fix, distract, move on) and choose to come back. Mindful listening is all about paying attention and noticing, and this includes noticing when tension, anxiety, or distraction arise. Often, these signal a desire to move away from being with the person and towards doing—for example, interrupting, changing the topic, or trying to “fix” the problem. When this tendency arises, simply notice it. Name it silently, “Ah! There's me trying to fix this,” and gently return to listening.

Be gentle with yourself. Many people didn't experience deep listening in their childhood and enter adulthood with a limited capacity for listening to and being with others' emotions. We tend to fall back on the communication styles and habits that we experienced in our family of origin, even if these are unhelpful in our adult relationships. Notice when these old tendencies are present and appreciate that it takes time to learn to communicate differently. Thankfully, deep listening does not require perfection; it requires awareness—and a willingness to practice coming back to those we love again and again.



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