

ACTIVE LISTENING

We often use the words 'hear' and 'listen' synonymously. But a dictionary will reveal that they have quite different meanings. To 'hear' is to perceive a sound or to realize that someone is making a sound. On the other hand, to 'listen' is to pay attention to a sound. While to hear is simply to become conscious of sound, to listen is to make a conscious effort to hear. We may often hear without listening! So, do we merely hear or truly listen to our children?

In his book *Parent Effectiveness*

Training, Thomas Gordon, a renowned psychologist, discusses a powerful communication tool called 'Active Listening'. Active Listening, adopted in classrooms and organisations, can also help parents forge strong bonds with their children.

TALK TIME

Let's overhear a conversation between Sarita and her son Rahul.

Rahul (*upset*): Amit is so bad!

Sarita: Why?

R: He wouldn't play with me today. He

never agrees to what I want to play.

S: OK, so play what he wants to.

R (*irritated*): But I don't want to play what he wants.

S: You must learn to get along with your friends.

R: I don't want to get along with him.

S: Then play with someone else since you are so stubborn.

R: I'm not stubborn. He's stubborn. He

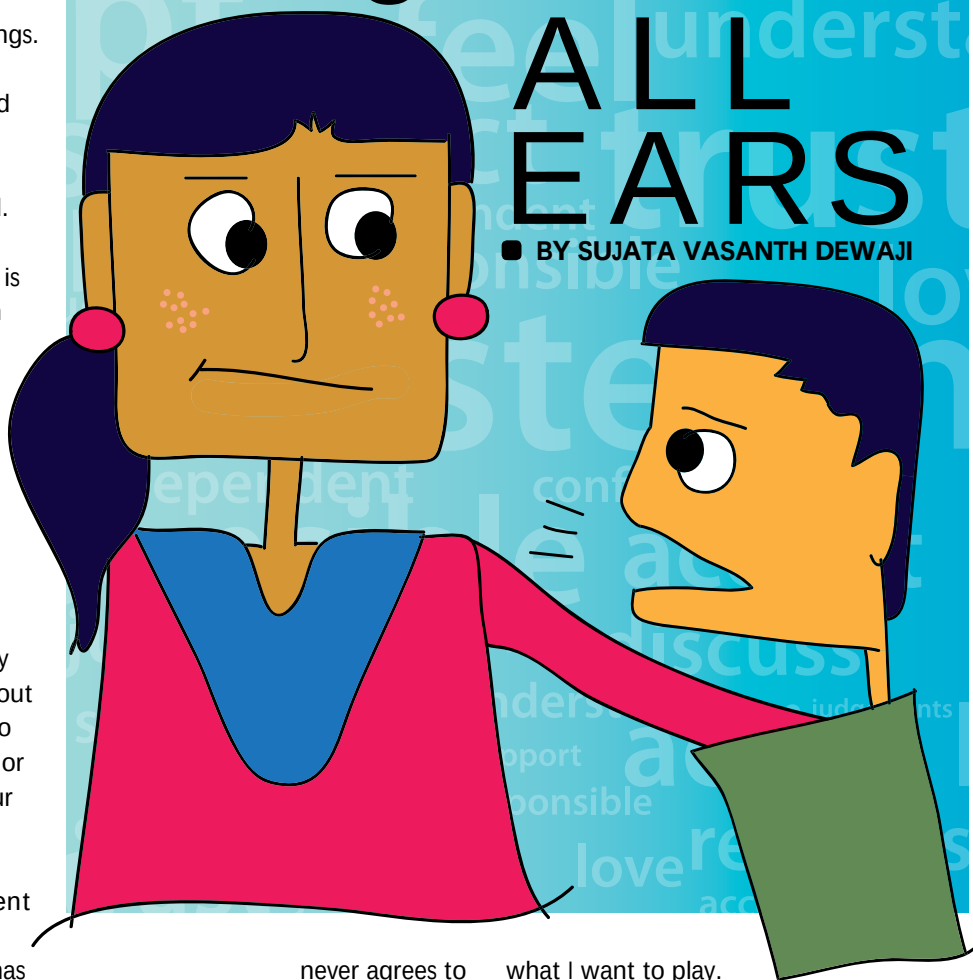
always tries to bully me. I hate him.

S (*angrily*): Rahul, don't use words like 'hate'.

R: You wouldn't understand, Mom.

Your child is talking? BE ALL EARS

■ BY SUJATA VASANTH DEWAJI



I shouldn't have come to you. (*He walks off in a huff*).

Rahul shared his feelings with his mother as he was upset. But instead of listening to him and empathizing with him, she began advising him. She heard what her son was saying but did not listen to him. She moralized, criticized and finally, admonished him. Rahul did not feel heard and understood. So he became defensive, angry and shut himself off.

In many such ways, parents create roadblocks to communication. They deny their child's feelings, interrogate, blame and label the child. He in turn feels that no one understands him,

and eventually stops sharing issues or problems with his parents.

YOU CAN BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER BY

► keeping your thoughts and judgment aside and listening with complete attention to what your child is saying.

► encouraging your children to share their feelings with door-openers like, 'Oh', 'Really?', 'Is that so?', 'I see', 'Then?' and open-ended questions like, "Would you like to tell me?", "It was

important for you?" and responses such as, "Yes, I'm listening", "I would like to know", "Let us discuss it". An eye contact, with a nod and silence, conveys that you are listening intently.

- ▶ identifying and acknowledging the child's feelings, and reflecting it back to him so as to convey that you have understood him completely.

- ▶ having immense faith and trust in your children's ability to work out things themselves.

LISTEN TO ME

Sarita can communicate effectively with her son Rahul in the following manner:

Rahul: Amit is so bad.

Sarita: You seem upset with Amit.

[acknowledges his feeling]

R: He wouldn't play with me today. He never agrees to what I want to play.

[wants to share his feelings]

S: Oh? *[encourages him to talk more]*

R: Yeah, I love hide-'n'-seek and he always says no. It's not fair! *[knows there is an active listener]*

S: Sometimes you wish he would play what you want. *[reflects his feelings]*

R: But he never listens. I don't want him to be my friend.

S: You are so angry that you feel you never want to see him again.

[understands him]

R: Mmm, yes... but there is no one else with whom I can play. *[calms down]*

S: It's boring for you as there's no one else, isn't it?

R: Yeah, but maybe I should play for some time what he wants to play. Then he will listen to me. I'll tell him we can play his game for an hour and later, mine. *[figures a way out]* Bye, Mummy. I love you.

Sarita listened intently and also encouraged her son to open up. She understood, accepted and acknowledged his feelings and showed that she trusted him. Rahul realised that his mother had heard and understood

him well. He confidently confided in his mother, calmed down, thought clearly and worked out a solution himself.

HOW ACTIVE LISTENING HELPS

Parents who learnt about active listening at our workshops shared stories of how it worked for them. Their talks also helped us understand what prevents them from truly listening to their children.

ASSUMPTION 1: As parents, we must solve our children's problems. That is our role.

Let us hear out Sandhya's tale:

"Applying the strategy of active listening on my daughter, then a 12-year-old, was a revelation. One evening, she came home furious. She had been removed from the lead role in the school play and was angry with her teacher and classmates. While she ranted and raved about how unjust it was, I wanted to ask her many things, criticize the others and tell her what to say to them the next day. But I actually helped her by just listening, empathizing and being there for her.

Next day, she returned from school with a thoughtful look saying that though she had got back the lead part, she had rejected the offer as that would hurt the girl who was now playing the role. Her good decision and her refusal to deprive another girl of happiness amazed me.

I wonder what the outcome would have been if that day I had 'told' her what to do? Would she have learnt that wonderful lesson in compassion? But you might ask - how about teaching her to fight against injustice? She will learn that from another experience!"

ASSUMPTION 2: When our children commit mistakes, we must



- ▶ When children approach you with a problem, don't rush to correct or advise them.

Listening and supporting them helps much more.

- ▶ When we listen to children and accept their feelings, they let go of negative feelings and find confidence to work things out for themselves.

- ▶ When children feel accepted, they will listen to their parents' views, too.

immediately correct them.

It was bedtime for Anju's daughters. When she hugged the older one Ragini, the younger one Neha came and pushed her older sister. When Anju tried to stop Neha, Neha flew into a rage. Anju was surprised and wanted to reprimand her, but she decided to first listen and find out if something was bothering her little girl.

She tried to reflect back her daughter's feelings and said, "Looks like you were feeling left out". "Yes", she answered, "and that's how I felt at school today, too." And with that, the child's sadness on being pushed out of the quiz team at school came to light. Anju was happy that she had been receptive to listening rather than correcting her child. Next morning, Neha woke up with a grin, willing to tackle whatever challenges she may face. Anju realised that paying undivided attention to her daughter had allowed Neha to confide in her.

ASSUMPTION 3: Children cannot make the right decisions and so we need to lecture and use force to control them.

Reema, a mother, had this to say: "My teenage daughter was keen on ▶▶

joining Facebook as her friends spent a lot of time in the evenings communicating with each other on it, and she felt left out. We had a conversation earlier in which I had told her why I was against a Facebook account. This time I wanted to give her an opportunity to voice her feelings and to make her own decision. I got her to share all her emotions about feeling left out, feeling pressurised by her peers, wanting to be 'cool' but also worrying about whether joining Facebook would affect her studies.

I was amazed when she finally said, "You know what? I am OK with chatting with a few buddies on the phone. I think people get addicted to

Facebook. I am in the 10th Standard and I should focus on studies now. Facebook can wait."

ASSUMPTION 4: We assume that children are not willing to take responsibility for their actions.

Sumitra's 11-year-old daughter Aruna was angry that the teacher had deprived them of their games period. Aruna got the whole class to sign a letter of protest to the teacher, which angered the teacher. When Aruna came home and narrated to her mother what had happened, much as Sumitra felt that her daughter was also at fault for taking such an extreme step, she just listened and empathized with Aruna. In the end, Aruna said, "It wasn't the right thing to do. Our letter was actually quite rude. I think we upset Ma'am."

under stress and would often get headaches.

One day, after an argument with some family members, he was very disturbed. I wanted to summarily tell him to respect family members. Then, I remembered my session, and decided to hear him out. So, I asked, "What's troubling you?"

That was enough. He poured out his frustrations. He expressed his feelings about losing someone he adored, his struggle with his studies, his loss of faith in God and on it went. I never interrupted him. I listened with empathy and tried to understand him. I focused on his need to express his feelings, rather than on my need to be a good parent by giving advice and teaching values.

After an hour of talking, in which I just reflected his feelings by saying, "I know, it's hard, you must be feeling bad," he said, "Mom, I am feeling much better now and I don't feel so angry anymore". A few days later, he told me, "Mom, after talking to you, my headaches have magically disappeared!"

As parents, often all we may need to do is listen. We do not need to always try and correct them or teach them values. Our children know what is right. They only need an outlet for their negative feelings and guilt. After truly listening, we can put across our point of view and they will be receptive to our guidance. It took a lot of effort to cultivate these skills but as I continue to use them to this day, I find my son far more relaxed and free of headaches." ■

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Active Listening helps the child feel heard

- ▶ He is willing to share his feelings
- ▶ He confides with the parent about his problems
- ▶ He is willing to listen to the parent's point of view

understood

- ▶ He learns how to express and deal with feelings
- ▶ He becomes calm and is able to think clearly and work out solutions
- ▶ He acquires high Emotional Quotient

accepted

- ▶ He has an open, trusting and warm relationship with parent
- ▶ He becomes responsible and independent
- ▶ He develops high self-esteem

SUNITHA'S STORY, AND THE MORAL

"I always considered myself a good listener and a very friendly mother with whom my children could share anything. I attended a

session on active listening. I felt complacent about myself as I believed that I was already following it. I was tested soon.

Because of a death in the family, we were going through a trying period at home. Living in a joint family meant adjustments. My son, who was in his 10th Standard, was

