

Empathetic Listening Samples

The Value of Listening:

Listening promotes the healing of emotional wounds. When someone really listens to someone, that other person often feels better. Feeling better means that the emotional wounds are healing. When the mentor listens to the child, the child feels appreciated, which means the child feels support, care, concern, encouraged, and most importantly, safe. The focus of listening is on the relationship, and not on the problem. As the child feels better, safer, more appreciated the healing process begins and promotes the goodwill between the child and the mentor. Nothing promotes a growth in trust, the keystone to a healthy relationship, than the ability to really listen empathetically to someone in need.

The following allows the comparison between Problem Solving, the culturally acceptable response, and the empathetic Listening response:

SITUATION #1:

Child: “All the kids went to the park and no one told me about it. Why didn’t they tell me?”

Problem Solving:

Mentor “Hey, well things don’t always turn out like we’d like them to. It’s no big deal. I’m sure the next time they will.”

Child, “They never do.”

Mentor, “Hey, that’s a poor attitude. Just give them a chance and they will. I’m sure.”

Listening:

Mentor, “Gee, that sounds upsetting. It’s hurtful to be left out.”

Child, “Well, I hate those kids anyway.”

Mentor, “It sounds tough to be with those kids.”

Child, “Yeah, well, they can do all sorts of things I can’t do. That’s probably why they don’t ask me along.”

Mentor, “It sounds really discouraging.”

Child, “Its not fair. Why don’t I know how to do the things other kids can do?”

Mentor, “That’s a good question. I know how confusing this all is. I need a bit more time to get a better feeling for what has been said. As soon as I get some insight, I’ll share it with you.”

SITUATION #2:

Picking up the child after school, the mentor asks the child, “How was your day?”

Child, “OK, but I hate math. I think that it’s dumb and stupid.”

Problem Solving:

Mentor, “Why do you think that math is dumb and stupid?”

Child, “I’m in seventh grade. I already know how to add, subtract, multiply, divide, and make change. What else do I need math for? I’ll never use geometry or algebra. Its a waste of time learning it.”

Mentor, “Well math is really important. You can’t get into college without knowing math. You won’t be able to think well without a foundation in math. You’re really wrong. Math is a critical skill for anyone who wants to get ahead. You want to go to college, don’t you? You have to know math to get admitted.”

Child, “Well, OK. So what are we going to be doing today?”

Listening:

Mentor responds, “Math can be confusing. It’s tough to spend time doing something that seems to be meaningless.

Child, “Yeah, anyway, if I have to do any math I can use a calculator or my computer.”

Mentor, “That’s right. As an adult, many people do use the calculator or their computer. Still I wonder why math like geometry and algebra are taught?”

Child, “Probably because you can’t get into college without it. Anyway, how is geometry or algebra used in the real world?”

Mentor, “That’s a great question. Let’s go to the library and see if they don’t have a book that describes the use of these types of math.” As they drive to the library the mentor says, “I do know this much. That math is meaningful in that it is a language that describes our physical reality. Like if one wants to be involved with science, then describing the physical world in some way is important. Math does that.”

Child, “I didn’t know that. Will there be a book that tells me about all this?”

Mentor, “I sure hope so.”

SITUATION #3:

The child gets into the car and tells the mentor that the teacher was mean.

Problem Solving:

Mentor, “I’m sure that the teacher didn’t mean anything by it. She was probably just having a bad day. Tomorrow will be better. You didn’t do anything to make her upset?”

Child, “No.”

Mentor, “Well, these things happen. Don’t worry about it.”

Listening:

Mentor, “That must have been upsetting.”

Child, “No, I wasn’t upset. Why?”

Mentor, “I don’t know. When the teacher is mean it sounds to me as though it would be upsetting.”

Child, “Well, she called on me to answer a question, and I didn’t know it.”

Mentor: “That must have been embarrassing.”

Child, “She told me that I wasn’t paying attention, and when I told her I was paying attention, I just didn’t get it she told me that because I am smart that I would have got it if I had been paying attention. I told her that I was listening. I just didn’t get it. Then she told me that I was talking back to her, and I told her I wasn’t. Then she told me to step outside the class, and pull myself back together. I wasn’t talking back to her, but she kicked me out of class anyway. Do you thing that it’s fair?”

Mentor, “It doesn’t sound as though it was fair.”

Child, “What do you think I should do?”

Mentor, "Its a tough situation. I really need more time to get a better feeling about what I just heard. As soon as I have some insight I will share it."

Child, "Every time I ask you what I should do, you always say that. Why don't you tell me what to do? I need help."

Mentor, "I can see how my not answering questions about what to do can be confusing. The reason I don't tell you what to do is because I don't believe that what I can tell you would be very helpful. Like, what do you believe most adults would tell a kid to do in this situation?"

Child, "Well, they would probably tell the kid to go talk to the teacher."

Mentor, "And how many kids could do that. Go talk to their teacher?"

Child, "Not many."

Mentor, "So if I told you that the right thing to do was go talk to the teacher, and you didn't feel safe or comfortable doing that, then how would you feel about my advice?"

Child, "I would think that you were dumb, and trying to set me up to look stupid."

Mentor, "Right. That's why I'm reluctant to give advice."

Child, "That makes sense, I guess."

SITUATION #4:

The child says to the mentor, "If you don't buy me that toy I won't like you any more."

Problem Solving:

Mentor: "That's not a nice thing to say to me. It kind of sounds like you are a bit spoiled. You know, we don't always get what we want, and not getting it is no reason to threaten someone with not liking them anymore. What of all the things we've done together. Doesn't any of that count?"

Listening:

Mentor: "Getting that toy would be fun, and I can see how disappointing it is not to get it. I do appreciate it when feelings are shared, and I thank you for that."

Child: "Does this mean that you're not going to get it for me?"

Mentor: "It's frustrating for me also that it isn't in our budget to get that toy. Its tough when we've spent the money on things we planned to buy, and we still want something else."

Child: "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Mentor: "Thanks. That helps me feel better."

SITUATION #5:

The child says to the mentor, "School is dumb. We don't do anything."

Problem Solving:

Mentor, "I'm sure that there must be something that you like at school. What about P.E.?"

Child, "I hate P.E. After we play we are all sweaty and then we have to sit in class all wet and smelly."

Mentor, "Well, I'm sure there's something good about school. No one hates everything. I'm sure if you spoke with your teachers they would help you come to appreciate what they are teaching."

Child, "Right. Sure."

Listening:

Mentor, "School can be a drag. It seems that some of the subjects are meaningless. Sometimes, school and the subjects taught can be a bit overwhelming."

Child, "I'm not overwhelmed. I just think school is dumb."

Mentor, "Well, when school is dumb that can mean that some of the subjects can be too hard."

Child, "Yeah, like math. I don't get it. Everyone seems to get it. I feel stupid."

Mentor, "Yes, its very frustrating not to get it."

Child, "How come I can't get it? I try to pay attention...its' just so meaningless. When am I ever going to use algebra anyway?"

Mentor, "I can relate to what you're saying. It seems to be a mystery. It hurts to feel dumb. Not getting something that other kids get can create a lot of feelings that are hurtful. I don't really have an answer, but I do appreciate the courage it took to share this with me. In the next few weeks I'll be focusing on this problem. Maybe in a while I'll have something to offer, and in the same time, you think about it too, and we can compare notes, OK?"

Child, "Yeah, OK. That's cool."

SITUATION #6:

The child says, "Nobody likes me."

Problem Solving:

Mentor, "I'm sure that's not true. I like you. I bet there are lots of people who like you."

Listening:

Mentor, "It feels sad when someone feels unliked."

Child, "Yeah. I'm sad."

Mentor, "Its tough. I feel concerned about this. I appreciate our time together. I find a lot of meaning being together. It allows me to feel needed and important, and I deeply appreciate having time with someone who gives me those feelings."

Child, "Really?"

Mentor, "Yeah, really."

Child, "Cool."

Mentor, "Yeah, cool as cool can be. Let's go down to the pier and see what's up."

SITUATION #7:

The child says when visiting the mentor's home, "I don't want to go home, and I'm not leaving."

Problem Solving:

Mentor, "You don't really mean that. It time to go, and anyway your mom is expecting you. Let's get going."

Listening:

Mentor, " I've really appreciated our time together. We had a pretty good time didn't we? I know that going home today seems a bit tough. It's hard for me to know what's really going on. I sure would be willing to hear about it."

Child, "Every time I go home after seeing you, well, everyone wants to know what we did. Pretty soon my brothers are pounding on me, punching me, you know, telling me that I'm not so special anyway. I hate that."

Mentor, "Thanks for sharing that. I can understand how going home is tough. It must be rough being caught up in that situation."

Child, "Can't I stay here with you?"

Mentor, "Thanks for saying that. It gives me the feeling that our relationship is working out pretty well. Staying here isn't really possible though. We have to keep to the schedule so that everyone knows that this is a good program. Returning home on time is critical if your parents are going to trust us."

Child, "My parents wouldn't care if I didn't come home, and my brothers definitely wouldn't."

Mentor, "It seems that coming out with me is causing a real problem at home. This is something that I don't know how to deal with either. Maybe this is something we should share about with the therapist. I bet that would help us. I'll bring it up in the next few days, and probably the therapist will guide us through this problem. OK?"

Child, "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

Mentor, "Thanks. I'll do it then."

SITUATION #8:

George comes home and walking into the house he says to Peter, his roommate, "I hate work!"

Problem Solving:

Peter looks up from the book he's reading and replies, "Yeah, what happened?" George jumps right into it and says, "You know that paper I worked on all night? Well, my boss took one look at it and threw it into the trash, and yelled at me that it wasn't what he asked for. Do you believe it, not what he wanted? It was exactly what he wanted, and better than he could do. I can't believe it, can you?"

Peter replies, "Hey, let me see it. You have a copy don't you?"

"Of course I have a copy. Here"

"Hmm," murmurs Peter, "I can see how much work went into this, but, you know, let's redo it on my publishing program I just bought, and tomorrow you can bring it, you know with colored graphs, diagrams, highlights, like a professional document. Your boss will be really impressed with your perseverance and determination."

"You think that will really help? He was pretty upset."

"You bet! Never take rejection," responds Peter.

They work for a number of hours, and eventually Peter puts the report into shape. "There," says Peter, "Its perfect! Your boss is really going to be impressed when you bring this report in tomorrow. I can't wait to hear about it."

The next day George comes storming in, shouting at Peter, "Worse than before. He took the report you redid and asked me if he thought he was an idiot. In his words, 'Same report, different cover!' He just glared at me and told me to get on with the work that I was capable of, if I really was capable of the work that I was hired to do. Can you believe that? I'm really messed up now. Thanks a lot Peter."

Listening:

Peter looks up from the book he's reading and pausing for a few seconds, replies, "Hmm, work sounds like it was really tough today?"

George jumps at Peter, "No, work wasn't tough. Why do you say that for?"

"I don't know, it just sounded tough, that's all."

"Well," George admits, "I guess it was. You know that paper I worked on all night? Well, my boss took one look at it and threw it into the trash, and yelled at me that it wasn't what he asked for. Do you believe it, not what he wanted? It was exactly what he wanted, and better than he could do!"

Peter responds, "George, having that kind of experience must have been very surprising and insulting."

"Insulting. That's exactly how I felt. I can do his job better than he can, and he knows it. The nerve of responding that way to the work I did. I just can't understand why he did it. Can you?"

Peter, nodding his head, looks up at George and says, "It's definitely confusing. I know how difficult the situation must have been."

"Do you think he was trying to put me in my place. Well he didn't if that's what he thought he was doing. I just can't figure out what he was doing. Why would he want to insult me like that? He must have had something on his mind to do that to me. What do you think?"

Peter, considering his response says, "George, sometimes its too frustrating to deal with something at the moment. Maybe, things will become clear later."

"You know, I think that was what he was doing; putting me in my place. Yeah, you know I have been pushing pretty hard at work, and I do know more about the job than he does, but I guess I have been going too far. If I was in his position I would be pretty upset with a hotshot like me, always knowing all the answers before he does. Maybe I should back off a bit, maybe more than a bit, maybe a lot. What do you think, huh?"

Peter responds with a smile, "George, that sounds pretty insightful. It feels good. I'm not sure of what's really happening, yet what has been shared fits."

"Thanks Peter, you're a good friend, listening to all this."

"I really appreciate having your trust like this," laughs Peter. "Friends for sure."