

Feeling Heard: The Practice of Active Listening

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

Recently my son was exploding in frustration when I responded to him. He would ask a question and then, when I would try to answer, he would shout, "Stop interrupting me!"

At first, I was baffled. I didn't think I was interrupting at all. He would ask a question. I would answer. But my answer was coming immediately after his question. There was no pause. No reflection. As he was asking, I was already formulating my response. And this clearly irritated him.

Twenty years ago, in my graduate program, the students and teachers practiced a technique of leaving space after another person's comments or questions. In discussions, the expectation was that there would be a pause before anyone responded. If a thought came to mind, you would allow room for it to breathe and sometimes others' responses might enter into the space first. This practice required an intense amount of patience and mindfulness. We became very attuned to noticing body language and subtle clues that might indicate another person's desire to participate in the conversation. We became more thoughtful about different perspectives. We became less attached to inserting our ideas.

As I went about my week, I thought about this process of pausing and listening. In meetings I focused on really hearing colleagues who wanted to express their concerns. When a parent needed to talk through a challenging process, I didn't focus on my own thoughts or potential responses, but rather opened my heart to everything she had to say. I realized that at home I also needed to show my son that I was giving his thoughts and questions this kind of careful consideration.

To reset my thinking, I turned to Positive Discipline and the approach of active listening. Rather than a quick retort, I worked to reflect my son's request back to him.

When he asked, "Can I watch a movie?" I paused, took a breath, and thoughtfully responded. "It sounds like you'd really like to watch something. I understand how fun that can be. I'm not willing for you to watch something, though, because we had a movie night last night." Certainly he didn't like all of my responses, but when I practiced active listening, he was calmer and less prone to react emotionally.

I begin to try the approach at other times, too, like when he would angrily say, "I hate you!" Using active listening, I would reflect back that it sounded like he was upset or angry with me. I focused on validating his emotions and in the process helped him identify feelings that could be hard to name. On good days I could allow him to explore even more deeply by asking, "Is there more?"

As a result of my active listening, my son began to feel heard and his behavior shifted. He was more regularly brimming with goodwill and cooperation. Which makes sense, because don't we all just want to feel heard?

~ When life gets really busy, K. Meagan Ledendecker has to work harder to practice active listening with her family. Her husband, her sixteen-year-old, and her almost-eleven-year-old tend to be more understanding in these busy times. But her six-year-old son is always a good barometer about the importance of slowing down. www.berkshiremontessori.org

