

Listening Skills

and the Virtue of Understanding

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Listening to understand. A skill worth learning.

Listening skills are highly valuable in regards to human/child development, relationships, self-esteem, family functioning, problem solving, learning and motivation. Some people (even children) seem to be naturally better at listening than others. However, this skill is greatly enhanced by good parent-teacher role-modeling. Listening skills are just one aspect of communication. Good overall communication skills are integral to high functioning human relationships.

Communication skills include a listener (the receiver) and a speaker (the transmitter). Good interpersonal listening also requires attention and focus (contrasted to listening as background music for other purposes such as working out, relaxation, or listening to radio or tv for recreation/entertainment). To be a good receiver one must be in tune or attentive to the speaker. This requires focused energy and interest in what the speaker is saying.

Carl Rogers, the creator of client-centered therapy and author of numerous books (*Client Centered Therapy*, *On Becoming A Person*, *Freedom to Learn*, *Becoming Partners*, *On Personal Power*, etc.) is considered the forerunner in the “improve your listening skills” movement which began in the 1960’s with the advent of Rogerian therapy. The essence of this type of counseling is “reflective” or “active” listening. These listening skills are easy to implement for parents, teachers, friends and counselors and are exercises where the receiver (listener) attends closely to whatever the speaker is saying. When the speaker pauses, the listener briefly reflects back to the speaker what s/he said (in a nutshell). The point is to get the speaker to feel understood and validated. The listener gives no opinions, judgments or evaluations of what the speaker said. The receiver’s (listener’s) objective is to get positive agreement from the speaker regarding the speaker feeling understood. The conversation becomes purposely one-sided with the goal of purely understanding the speaker and his/her point of view.

This formula for reflective/active listening is a primary building block for understanding and helps the speaker develop a sense of peace (reducing frustration, agitation and angst) and engages him or her socially by soothing via the gift of understanding. Consequently, the speaker typically desires to remain engaged in relationship with the listener. Thus, reflective listening helps to deter social-emotional shut-downs (characterized by the speaker becoming mute, socially disengaging and withdrawing from the conversation due to misunderstanding or frustration). Without the use of reflective listening, the speaker is also more likely to escalate emotionally by over-striving to make his/her point and be understood. Emotional escalation can take the form of tirades or temper tantrums and can result in emotional and relationship brokenness and exasperation. Thus to avoid these pitfalls of misunderstanding it is well worth a parent, teacher, spouse or friend to master the art of reflective listening. This listening style leads, via the virtue of understanding, to other gifts of the Holy Spirit including joy and peace. These fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit lead to more effective problem solving, improved love of neighbor and an overall positive chain reaction that affects learning, motivation and relationship - all stemming from the virtue and gift of understanding through listening. ■



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