Skill three: Listening and connecting

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” Ralph Nichols

“Listening is noting what, when and how something is being said. Listening is distinguishing what is not being said from what is silence. Listening is not acting like you’re in a hurry, even if you are. Listening is eye contact, a hand placed gently upon an arm. ... Listening involves suspension of judgment. It is neither analysing nor racking your brain for labels, diagnoses, or remedies. Listening creates a safe space where whatever needs to happen or be said can come.” Allison Para- Bastien

My daughter, being an extrovert, used to come home from school talking nineteen to the dozen about what had happened that day. “Sophie told Hannah that she wasn’t going to be her friend anymore and Hannah won’t invite her to her party and ... I want to be friends with both Hannah and Sophie but if I go to Hannah’s party Sophie won’t be my friend anymore!...etc” I was very tempted to jump in with my pearls of wisdom that I ‘knew’ would solve the problem and teach my daughter some valuable life skills. Luckily something stopped me and I looked at her and just nodded and said hmmm occasionally. I discovered that if I bit my tongue and just listened my daughter would talk her way round to her own solutions. She needed opportunities to vent, she needed me to be her sounding board and, having off-loaded, she felt heard and understood.

My daughter has always been a talker but my older boy was not, particularly as a teenager. While Gemma’s feelings were all out in the open for anyone to hear Christian buried his deep inside. We became aware of them, not through his direct words, but through body language and through his actions and sometimes in reading between the lines when he did speak. On one occasion I recall talking to him when he hadn’t been very at all kind to his brother. He had used his words then... to put his younger sibling down. He teased him and called him names and belittled him. He made an ‘L’ shape out of his fingers and mouthed the word ‘loser’ whenever he passed him. Lurking behind these hurtful words was a big painful feeling. I talked to Christian first about how he was feeling, not about how he had made his brother feel –that would come later. Christian struggled at school and had exams coming up so I knew he was probably feeling stressed –although he would have said he didn’t care about the exams. I didn’t ask him what he was feeling as I had learnt that would have drawn a blank. I just sat with him and stroked his back and reflected back to him what I thought he was feeling. “Maybe you’re feeling a bit stressed about these exams. You might be worried that they’ll be hard and you won’t do well. You might think that Mum and Dad will be disappointed if that happens.... You might be comparing yourself with Gemma and thinking she always does well in tests. Perhaps you feel it’s not fair that she finds school work easy and for you it’s more of an effort. ... etc” Christian didn’t say much but his shoulders dropped from where they’d been up around his ears and his breathing slowed. He stopped clenching and unclenching his fists and jaw. Afterwards I heard him playing with his brother. He was being kind and teaching him how to play a new game of his own devising. This is also ‘listening’. It’s enabled me to connect with my son and him to connect with his own feelings and understand that they were driving his behaviour.
“Children’s behaviour is symptomatic of their internal emotional, physical or neurological state. To affect their behaviour, their internal state must first be understood, then accepted, then addressed.” – Bonnie Harris.

We have all experienced behaviour driven by feelings, even if we didn’t recognise it at the time. You may have witnessed melt downs in the toy shop when your child can’t have the new super duper Lego helicarrier (you only went in to buy some playing cards) or an unreasonable flare up at breakfast when you’ve run out of Shreddies or complete defiance and rudeness when you suggest the Xbox is turned off. You may have seen nastiness between siblings or withdrawn behaviour and an upset face when you pick your child up from school. You may have been embarrassed by your child’s unsportsmanlike upsetting of the game board when he’s lost a game. You may have despained over your child refusing to get into the pool for swimming lessons or behaving in an ungrateful way when you’ve taken them on a treat outing. You may have berated yourself for failing to pass on your values to your children if they make unkind remarks about other children’s achievements. You may also have seen a super-charged excited child racing around the house or jumping on the sofa. These are all behaviours driven by feelings (and sometimes sugar).

When parents react to the behaviours only without considering the feelings causing them it’s a bit like pulling up a weed without getting the roots. The poor behaviour will materialise again.

Our children’s behaviour is akin to that part of an iceberg which sits above the water while their feelings are the part below the water. In other words, what we see on the surface is only a fraction of the whole.

You may know adults who still don’t handle feelings well. If children aren’t taught how to manage emotions they grow up to be people whose actions are fuelled by stress, anger, disappointment, feelings of inadequacy and fear. These adults may be depressed, angry, permanently dissatisfied or unable to connect emotionally. They may not be able to handle the anxiety associated with taking on new things; they may not put themselves forward for opportunities. In their relationships they may not be able to communicate or be available in loving ways. They may not have learnt how to be compassionate and generous and demonstrate caring.

Understanding and connection come from real listening and acceptance – this is at the heart of positive parenting.

Parents are personal trainers for kids. They need to be emotion coaches to help their children understand their emotions and to:

- build emotional intelligence and self-esteem,
- foster deep connections with them, encouraging them to talk and solve problems and
- help them learn to regulate their behaviour.
Your young child, with his immature frontal lobes, is very much driven by his emotional brain but you can help his logical brain develop with emotionally responsive parenting. When parents are emotion coaches the child’s brain is shaped and connections made between the higher (cool) brain and the lower (hot) brain. When parents help children deal with their feelings connections are formed that help control and quieten the primitive impulses of rage, fear or distress that can overwhelm them. You can help your child think about and rationalise her feelings rather than just act on them such as by hitting out or running away. Emotion coaching allows neural connections to form that last into adulthood to enable him to cope with stress, form loving relationships, handle anger, disappointment, frustration and other upsets, have ambitions and the motivation to pursue them and be compassionate.

Emotion coaching – what is it?

Emotion coaching is about recognising, respecting and responding constructively to a child’s emotions. It involves modelling how to handle feelings and coaching children in what to do with their feelings. Emotion coaching is not permissiveness - acknowledging the emotional background to a behaviour doesn’t mean the behaviour goes unchecked; sometimes further action is needed. (Have a look at this video on Youtube of Haim Ginott talking about the difference between permissive and strict parenting. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMo80A_AAEw. Also on our website – Our book/Resources page)

It’s also not entering into the feeling with the child or agreeing with them. So if your child says “I hate it how I never get any headmaster’s commendations, I will never get a triangle on my blazer, it’s just not fair!” Instead of saying “Yes, I agree the system isn’t fair” maybe say something like “You really, really want a triangle on your blazer don’t you? You feel like you’ve worked really hard and that you’ve earned a commendation. It feels unfair that your efforts haven’t been recognised.”

Match loneliness

Nick (10) had a rugby tournament on Saturday morning. We had a really busy weekend planned so Paul dropped him off and I’d arranged to get him. I told him I would try to get to the match before the end. I got there about 15 minutes before it was due to end. I was rather disappointed to see that it had already ended so I ran in and he came up to me apparently quite happy saying that his team had won and he’d done a good tackle.

We got in the car and he asked in a slightly wobbly voice why I hadn’t been there. Instead of making excuses I turned round and observed his face. I could see that his mouth was puckered a bit and his eyes were looking down. I said ‘Nick you look sad; I think you must have been really disappointed that no one was there to watch you’. At that point he nodded, grabbed a jumper and buried his face in it and started to cry. I felt so awful myself but wanted to focus on his feelings rather than mine. I just said ‘It is so much nicer when you are playing and you have mummy or daddy watching on the side. You can look up and see us rooting for you. It must have been hard to play the whole game...
wondering if we were going to come and feeling a bit lonely without anyone there for you'. He nodded and snuffled into his jumper and continued to quietly sob. I did say after that that I wished I could wind the clock back and how sorry I was not to have been there. Shortly afterwards he moved on but it was from releasing the feeling rather than sweeping it away and he looked visibly lighter.

Emma, mother of two boys and two girls

Emotion coaching involves putting yourself in your child’s shoes and imagining how she feels. Then describe to her how you think she is feeling.

Some examples:

“I imagine that you felt jealous when Sarah moved up to level 3.”

“Perhaps you felt left out when the others wouldn’t let you play with them.”

“I’m guessing you don’t want to have a bath right now as you are really enjoying that game.”

“It takes courage to try something if you’re worried you might not get it right. Maybe you think you will look silly if you make a mistake.”

“Maybe it feels like people are telling you what to do all day long and you wish you could be the one to say what happens.”

“I know you think tidying is boring”

Emotion coaching in a nutshell

- Emotionally intelligent children have greater self-esteem, resilience and compassion for others and become good problem-solvers and communicators.
- Parents can help children develop emotional intelligence and build key connections between their rational and emotional brains by being emotion coaches.
- The listening and connecting involved in emotion coaching makes for closeness and understanding between parents and children. Battles are avoided and behaviour improves.
- Being an emotion coach means recognising, respecting and reflecting back to the child what he is feeling. This doesn’t mean accepting the behaviour arising out of the feeling.
- Children learn constructive ways of handling feelings through parental modelling and coaching.
- When your child shows through words or actions that they are in the grips of an emotion:
  - Listen, without offering advice
  - Imagine how he is feeling
  - Describe that feeling to him
  - Give wishes in fantasy
- Don’t try to take her feelings away
- Don’t say ‘but’