

## Listen Here and Now: Cultivating Caring Kids

We are living in a multi-tasking age, a culture in need of an immediate-if-not-sooner response. Adults and teens seem to be constantly pulled away from the present by a barrage of rapid-fire texts, emails, tweets or friend requests, in any given hour, any time of day or night. When can we truly pay attention, listen and be attuned to what is squarely in front of us? Why has that digital conversation become more urgent, or enticing than talking face to face with a friend, child, partner or colleague? One response may be, it has become the new norm... but, with that norm, how can young people today learn the art of fully present communication?

Sustained attention and attunement are the foundation for the earliest healthy parent-child communication. Being fully present in the moment with your child demonstrates the message of care and consistency, and fosters healthy social and emotional development. Empathy, or the ability to understand the feelings and perspective of others, and to use that understanding to guide one's actions, has been investigated throughout child development research. It is no surprise, that technology has significantly altered critical social-emotional and moral developmental tasks, specifically the basic manner and mode of relating and communicating. Today, young people respond at lightning-speed to a Facebook post or email. Some hit "reply all" unempathically, with a hostile retort, or post in-

appropriate, hurtful photos online, at a peer's expense, before thinking about potentially destructive consequences such as hurting the individual's feelings or damaging the relationship. It is commonplace, for a child to keep texting, while with a friend on a play date. This can cause hurt feelings. The friend could feel excluded and second in importance to a virtual conversation. At these critical moments, parent modeling and guidance can create and cultivate a child's empathy, awareness and connection. The problem is that many of these interactions happen out of the parent's view or ear-shot.

This evident and widespread empathy gap can be obvious throughout children's and adults' technology use. Social cues, nuances and etiquette seem to evaporate in cyberspace. The immediacy and allure of digital access has seemingly eclipsed the face-to-face conversation, the dynamic, give-and-take interaction and eye contact, or the comfort and tone of our best friend's voice.

Young children and teens today are highly influenced by their peers, but decades of child development research demonstrates that parents are truly the pivotal models for children's healthy communication and behavior. Parents model the earliest attachment and empathy, including verbal and non-verbal cues, self regulation and attunement – and in conversations and time shared between parent and child.

It is vital to tune in to our children, listen intently, and connect with undivided attention. Research also suggests that it is not the quantity, but the quality of one special block of time each day we share with our children that matters the most. Parents can encourage children to have a conversation, either face to face, or by phone, when resolving a communication conflict with a family member or peer. Urge your child to try to stand in a peer's shoes and take their perspective. Ultimately, children learn what they live and experience from primary caregivers, and thrive with healthy limits. Parent's model through example, establishing boundaries, including self-control related to device use and social media. Try technology-free rooms of the house, and protected time when devices are prohibited, for instance, family dinners and concentrated activities that encourage interactive communication.

When we truly listen with calm, undivided intention, we encourage our children to communicate with us their feelings, needs and ideas. Parents can strengthen and support children by encouraging them to offer this level of care, honor and respect for peers through each human interaction, whether digitally or in person.

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