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LEARN TO LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN

By Diane Trautman

Parents frequently tell me that they can't help their children with their homework. It may be that they don't understand the current approach to the subject, but most often it seems the issue is the resistance they face from their son or daughter when they offer help. The child's hesitancy may be a demonstration of self-sufficiency or it could be a signal that communications have broken down.

Children will argue with their parents. It's part of growing up. But constant battles erode the relationship and make parent and child perpetual adversaries. We may find ourselves responding emotionally, rather than rationally, and falling into the trap of proving ourselves right rather than teaching the child how to behave in a responsible manner. The latter takes time and patience.

We can establish better communication with our children by scheduling a regular time each day, under calm circumstances, to talk with and listen to them. By putting aside other demands and fully focusing on the child, we demonstrate respect.

Respect is at the heart of a proactive approach to communication called responsive listening, which requires that we approach conversations with a sense of curiosity and a desire to learn. When a statement is made, according to this technique, we respond by restating the comment to show that we've understood the intent. We then invite correction or further exploration of the topic, and finally allow time for reflection. We have to be willing to really hear what the other person is saying, and resist the urge to dispute or defend a position.

We should encourage our children to take the lead in initiating a dialogue and watch for non-verbal clues through their body language and facial expressions that can tell us what their words don't convey. Children don't always know the underlying reasons for their feelings or actions, but by inviting discussion and remembering that we are their first teachers, we can help them begin to define themselves and find solutions to their problems.

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