

Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

(An initiative of the Child Abuse Prevention Council and County Superintendent of Schools)



September Focus:

Listen

Listening at its best shows we value both the message and the messenger. That's why listening is a civil thing to do. Unfortunately, we often focus more on our own needs than on what someone is saying. Some of us interrupt, finish a person's sentence, or cut the speaker off when we think of something to add to a conversation. We often allow other thoughts to jump into our minds or distractions to take our attention away from the person who is talking. We may even be guilty of looking at our watches or the clock when someone is talking to us. Of course, as we've learned in previous months' articles, we must respect other people's time by not dragging a conversation on and on and it's good advice to pay attention to notice if someone appears to be in a hurry or preoccupied. We all want to be heard.

Communication is such a delicate balance of talking and listening. According to Greek philosopher Epictetus, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak."

I experienced the wonderful results of being listened to last spring. I had approached a colleague I admire and respect for his vast experience and amazing reputation. I had questions about the Choose Civility Campaign in his own county and was quite honored when he turned his attention to me to listen to my questions and ideas. Within seconds he made me feel like I was the only person in the world. He listened attentively. He nodded, leaned toward me, raised his eyebrows and smiled when he heard my ideas. He asked clarifying questions and waited patiently for me to formulate my thoughts. I lost my shyness and insecurities instantly and felt as though I really mattered to him. I'll never forget that conversation because he honored my thoughts with his behavior.

Let's contrast that experience with the evening my daughter stopped talking to me and declared, "Would you just listen to me? I'm trying to tell you something important!" It was like a slap in my face and I'm sad to admit that I was preoccupied with some worry and a task that could have waited. Our children are critically impacted by our actions because we are the real life examples from which they learn. As parents, caregivers,

teachers and adult role models we really are valued by children and our impact on their future behaviors is profound.

To illustrate this point further, I was participating in a meeting just this morning and witnessed a frustrated participant request of another to please let her finish her point before being interrupted yet again. She was in obvious discomfort for having to correct a fellow adult but I couldn't fault her because the other person was intent on making her own point rather than hearing and understanding the issues the other one was presenting. Although there was an awkward moment among adults, the point was well taken and respect reentered our conversation. Conflicts can be avoided if we listen to understand.

Based on that and other experiences with adults, some ideas to help us listen more attentively and actively to each other include:

- Fight the urge to interrupt or finish a person's sentence. I actually often hold my hand over my mouth in a meeting when I begin feeling like I have a point I want to make.
- Tell yourself, "This is the most interesting thing I've ever heard!"
- React with facial expressions, head nods and posture to indicate you're processing what you are being told.
- Wait until the person finishes speaking, then say, "Here's what I think you said." Summarize then ask, "Did I get that right?"
- Try a game of Listening Tag my husband and I created so we could each spend equal time talking about our own day and listening to each other (If you know me, can you guess which one tended to dominate the conversation? 😊). One of us tells about one event from our day while the other listens. The speaker tags the other when the description is complete. The partner tagged must ask one question about what was just explained and then proceed to tell about one event from his day. When finished, he tags the other who asks one question then tells about one more event from her day and so on.

When listening to children, we should take specific steps to help them feel heard, and therefore valued. Try to:

- Put aside any distracters like the newspaper, emails, chores and other tasks.
- Look directly at children, even kneeling to their level.
- Demonstrate real interest with facial expressions, gasps and nods.
- Ask clarifying questions so you really understand what they are saying, even paraphrasing or restating their words so they have a chance to say you've understood or correct you if that's not what they meant.

When teaching our children to listen, start simply and build in complexity.

- Give single step directions to young children such as "Bring me your blue shoes." If children don't listen to the details and bring the brown shoes instead, simply

- redirect such as “Thank you for bringing your shoes. These shoes are brown. Please bring me your *blue* shoes.”
- Help children learn to enjoy the sounds of words by using rhyming, chanting, poetry, nursery rhymes, simple sentence patterns and by repeating favorite stories. Our daughter just loved it when we got into the car and I chimed, “Seatbelts on and smiles on faces. Here we go to interesting places!”
 - Ask simple questions while reading picture books to young children. You can ask for one simple detail such as, “Where did Bobby go?” or more complicated questions about longer passages as children get older checking to see if they are listening to details.
 - Help children listen for sounds by having them close their eyes and listen for a sound way in the background, like birds singing or a truck horn on the highway. Then have them listen to your voice. Help them understand that your voice is in the foreground while the other sounds are in the background. This can help them, for example, if they are in a classroom listening to their teacher (foreground) while a lawn is being mowed outside the classroom window (background).
 - Play listening games such as, “If I took a trip to the moon, I’d take...” One person states that opening and tells one item he or she would take. The next person has to repeat the opening statement, the first person’s item and adds his or her own. The third person repeats all that was stated adding his or her own. This series continues until someone forgets some item listed. For example, by the time five people have played, the sixth person might have to say, “If I took a trip to the moon, I would take a sleeping bag, camera, mac and cheese, Fluffy, broccoli and...my football cards.” The next person repeats all that and adds one item to the list.
 - Our son taught us a new listening game he calls Last Word. The first person talks about something and the listener has to start a new sentence about the same topic using the last word from the first person’s sentence. That goes on and on until the topic is exhausted. For example, the first person might say, “When geese fly south for winter, they form V shapes.” Then the second person must start the new sentence with the last word “shapes” so the sentence might be “Shapes used for their flight are very economical in terms of wind drafts.” The first person must start a sentence with “drafts” such as “Drafts caused by the V shape are kind of like when we drive behind a big truck.” What must the next person’s sentence start with? Right! Truck.

Books for children about listening:

A delightful children’s picture book about listening is called The Listening Walk. It was written by Paul Showers and illustrated by Alike. This book is great for preschool through about second grade.

One of my favorite folktales was retold by Ann McGovern and is titled Too Much Noise. Sweet lessons about families can be learned from this story too.