

## how to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk

I care about other people's feelings. Really I do. But they haven't always heard that message.

A number of years ago I was coaching an eager church volunteer about how to track attendance. She seemed a little overwhelmed, and she said, "I don't know. The whole spreadsheet thing makes me nervous."

"Don't worry," I said. "It's easy."

When she left the room still worried, my boss shook his head and said, "I hope you never say that again."

Huh?

"When you said 'It's easy,' what she heard was, 'It's easy for me, stupid.'"

Since I read *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, I do that sort of thing less often now. It's a classic parenting book, but the lessons are easily transferable to loving, disciplining, and counseling with youth.

The first chapter explains how I blundered in that early case. In an effort to comfort or re-establish order, parents (and youth workers) frequently refuse to accept their children's feelings. We say things like:

"You're just saying that because you're tired."

"There's no reason to get upset."

"Don't be scared."

My implied message to the volunteer was, "I'm not going to listen to how you feel because that's not important. Now listen to the truly important wisdom I'm about to impart."

According to the authors: "When I'm upset, the last thing I want to hear is advice, philosophy, psychology, or the other fellow's point of view. That kind of talk only makes me feel worse...But let someone really listen, let someone acknowledge my inner pain and give me a chance to talk more about what's troubling me, and I begin to feel less upset, less confused, more able to cope with my feelings and my problem."

The book is a bit like a how-to handbook that might go along with a workshop. It's full of practical tips, examples, and lots of anecdotes. For instance, the authors have a short checklist of things we can do to acknowledge the feelings of a person in distress. Most people will find these three ideas simple to understand but difficult to put into practice.

- **Listen with full attention.** Put down your phone, turn your chair around, and quietly listen to the whole story.

- **Acknowledge their feelings.** Instead of jumping in with questions or advice, start with simple phrases that indicate you care: "Oh." "I see." "Tell more more." Coupled with a caring attitude, these are invitations for a child to explore his or her own feelings, and possibly come up with their own solutions.

- **Give the feelings a name.** We deny a child's feelings by saying things like "Everything's okay," or "Don't freak out." But when we say, "That must have been frustrating," or "Sounds like you're pretty mad," then we convey an empathy and understanding that leads to constructive conversation.

The book—which is probably in your local library—also covers ways to engage cooperation from ornery kids, alternatives to punishment, and strategies for encouraging autonomy. Not a week goes by that I don't use one of the techniques I learned from this classic how-to book. And I get a lot fewer lectures from my boss on how I treat people. ■

