

Attentive Listening: Tracking to Verify Message Received

The other day I was having my regular one-on-one connecting time with my teenage son and the issue of managing expectations arose. He opined that one should not have high expectations because one is setting oneself up for disappointment. I found myself struggling to hear what he was trying to get at. I found myself thinking, "Was he struggling with his studies, or maybe exams, friendships, fears, on and on?" Soon I was drifting even as he spoke, I was struggling to hear him as his voice faded and my thoughts loomed louder. I realized I was not listening to him.

I had to stop my own thoughts and to simply listen. I said, "I hear you say..." And after a few of these conscious feedbacks, I found myself listening to his voice and words again. It is hard to put aside my problem solving mindset as a parent when I see my own son struggling. But I needed to be discipline to prioritize that I need to appreciate his thinking through process than to give him solutions.

Children need to feel that they are being heard by their parents. This involves the skill of Verbal Tracking:

1. Use "I" statements in your regular constant feedback when you want to let your child know you are listening Use "I hear you say..." after every 5 sentences you hear. Saying "Uh" or nodding your head will not do because the child will not get the impression that you hear.
2. Do not allow the child to speak or tell a long story without giving feedback because there's simply too much information and you can get lost in the details.
3. It is also useful to do the reverse. Get the child to repeat what you had said especially when giving instructions so that you know your child has heard exactly what you said and MEANT. VERIFY to avoid misunderstandings.

As concerned fathers we are quick to protect our kids from discomfort. But they need the space to find their own way beginning with their thoughts. More importantly children want to be heard and understood by their parents, especially teenagers.

I came away from that conversation knowing that he is really growing up and developing his moral and social intelligence. It was a wonderful privilege to be able to catch a glimpse of my son's inner life simply by stopping myself from the "fix it" mode.