

Learning Your Child's Language

IT'S NOT WHAT I SAY . . .

Trauma can impact children's ability to understand, tolerate, and manage feelings. Even minor stressors can act as *triggers* that flood children with emotion. Often, children do not even know what it is that is upsetting them—only that there is a strong, bad feeling inside of them, and that *something* needs to happen to make it go away. In the face of these overwhelming feelings, and without strategies to cope with them, children will simply *react*: They work out the distress with their bodies and their actions.

Often, the only thing harder than dealing with feelings is talking to other people about them—especially for children who don't know themselves what they are feeling, or why they are feeling it. Furthermore, for children who have been hurt in the past by other people, or who did not have their needs met early in life, reaching out for help may feel dangerous or frightening.

WHAT I'M TRYING TO SAY IS . . .

Most children communicate to some degree through behavior; the ability to use words to share feelings and experience grows naturally over the course of development, particularly as caregivers use their own words to reflect back experience. Consider these examples:

A 4-year-old returns home from preschool. She is quieter than usual, and when her mother asks if she wants to play, she shakes her head and curls up in a chair. Her mother sits next to her and says, "You're so quiet today. Do you feel sick?" The child shakes her head.

A 10-year-old comes home from school and slams the door. He throws his bag onto the kitchen table and says, "I'm never riding that stupid bus again!"

A 15-year-old has been nervous about her first date. She spends an hour in her room, trying on clothes, then finally comes downstairs, tearful. "Everything looks so stupid on me—I'm not going!"

Most caregivers are familiar with situations such as these, and—even if the precipitating event isn't yet known—will quickly recognize that feelings are driving these behaviors. Through their own words or actions, caregivers help children name and work through the emotion-inducing life events that they experience day to day.

The experiences driving traumatized children's behaviors may be less obvious, and the feelings may be bigger, stronger, or more sudden, but at core, the emotions are the same: fear, sadness, anger, anxiety, and even joy.

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TUNING IN

Attunement is the ability to "read" (understand) your children's cues and respond in a way that helps them manage their emotions, cope with distressing situations, and/or make good choices. When a caregiver is attuned, he or she can respond to the emotion underlying a child's actions, rather than simply reacting to the most distressing behavior.

Consider two different scenarios for one of the above examples:

A 10-year-old comes home from school and slams the door. He throws his bag onto the kitchen table and says, "I'm never riding that stupid bus again!"

Scenario 1: His mother is going through mail in the kitchen and looks up as he enters the house.

MOTHER: How many times have I told you not to slam that door!

CHILD: (*Kicks his bag.*) What's the big deal—it's just a stupid door!

MOTHER: That's it—if you can't be polite, you can just go to your room!

Scenario 2: His mother is going through mail in the kitchen and looks up as he enters the house.

MOTHER: Whoa—you seem pretty mad. Did something happen on the bus?

CHILD: (*Looks down, kicking his bag gently.*) Stupid bus driver hates me—he won't let me sit with my friends. I'm not riding it anymore!

MOTHER: (*Pulls out a chair.*) C'mere—why don't you tell me what happened, and we'll see if we can figure it out?

In the first scenario the child's mother responds to the behavior—slamming the door—and the emotion escalates, leaving both mother and child frustrated. In the second example the mother responds to the emotion—anger? frustration?—and provides the child with support, calming the situation.

Most situations aren't quite this straightforward, and no caregiver can be attuned at all times. The goal is not to be the "perfect parent," but to try—more times than not—to understand the feelings driving children's behavior.









PUTTING ON YOUR DETECTIVE HAT

Attunement requires caregivers to be "feelings detectives." Every child gives cues that help signal what might be going on.

Learn your child's individual communication strategies. Pay attention to the following areas and consider: How does your child look when he/she is angry? Sad? Excited? Worried? For each of these emotions, ask yourself the following questions:

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 <p>Facial expression</p>	<p>What does your child show on his face? This may include intense expressions, but may also include a lack of expressiveness.</p>
 <p>Tone of voice</p>	<p>Does your child's voice become louder? Softer? Higher-pitched?</p>
 <p>Extent of speech</p>	<p>Does your child suddenly have more to say than usual? Does she become quiet? How pressured (in a rush) is her speech?</p>
 <p>Quality of speech</p>	<p>Do your child's words become disorganized? Is he rambling or having a hard time getting words out? Do his words seem more babyish or regressed than usual?</p>
 <p>Posturing/muscular expression</p>	<p>What does your child's body look like? Is she curled up? Are her fists clenched? Are her muscles tense or loose? Is her posture closed or open?</p>
 <p>Approach versus avoidance</p>	<p>Does your child become withdrawn and retreat? Does he become overly clingy? Does he seem to want to do both at the same time?</p>
 <p>Affect modulation capacity</p>	<p>Does your child seem to have a harder time than usual being soothed, and/or self-soothing? Does she start to need more comforting from you or someone else? How receptive is she to comfort—does this change in the face of stress?</p>
 <p>Mood</p>	<p>Does your child's mood overtly change? For instance, is he normally even-tempered, but becomes more reactive in the face of intense emotion? If so, pay attention to signs of moodiness—it can serve as a warning sign that something is going on.</p>

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NOW WHAT?

When your detective skills tell you that something is going on with your child, it's time for action. But what kind of action? Often, we rush to solve children's problems for them or try to help them "solve" things themselves. Sometimes, though, the most important action is simply to be there, to provide support, and to help children name, understand, and regulate their feelings. Only after doing that can children move toward solving problems.

Consider a possible example from your own life: You've had a hard day, your boss is irritating you, people are making demands, and you come home ready for a little sympathy. Your spouse notices that you are upset and asks what is going on. You begin to unload: "My boss is so unreasonable! Can you believe he asked me to . . ." Your spouse listens to your story, then shrugs, and says, "Well, you could have . . ." (or "Why don't you just . . .?").

Do you feel more frustrated, or less?

Most of us want someone to *listen to us* before they solve our problems or tell us what we could have, should have, or what *they* would have done. When people listen to us, understand us, and give us empathy, it validates our experience, shares the burden, and often, helps us begin to feel better.

The following five rules/steps for reflective listening can help caregivers (or partners in any type of listening situation) become better listeners.

Reflecting Listening Skills for Caregivers

Step	Description
1. Accept and respect all of a child's feelings.	There should never be a hidden agenda to "change" the child's feelings. A child feels what he/she feels. We may not like the child's <i>behaviors</i> , or we may not completely understand the reaction, but it should always be okay to be mad, or sad, or excited.
2. Show your child that you are listening.	Use active listening skills: Use eye contact, nod your head, respond verbally, etc. Don't interrupt too much or take over the conversation. Use all the techniques that you like someone to use when they are paying attention to you.
3. Tell your child what you hear him/her saying.	Reflect back what you hear. Validate the importance of the situation to the child (even if you, yourself, do not think it was that big of a deal): <i>"So, you didn't think your teacher was listening to you? Wow, that must have been really hard."</i> Ask questions if you're not sure what part affected the child.
4. Name the feelings.	Reflect back the child's feelings. If your child doesn't state a feeling, offer a guess (name at least two possibilities), but be prepared to be wrong: <i>"You seem kind of worried or maybe angry. Is that right?"</i>

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	<p>Name the cues—<i>why</i> do you think the child seems worried or angry. Always allow the child to correct you. If your child denies any feelings at all, let that be okay, but then either</p> <p>1. Name the behaviors:</p> <p><i>"Okay, maybe you're not mad, but you're throwing your things around and yelling. What do you think might be going on?"</i></p> <p>Or</p> <p>2. Normalize feelings in general:</p> <p><i>"Okay, maybe you're not mad, but I can understand how someone might feel really mad or upset if someone wasn't listening to them."</i></p>
<p>5. Offer advice/ suggestions/ reassurance/ alternative perceptions <i>only</i> after helping the child to express how he/she feels.</p>	<p>Don't jump to problem solving until you've taken the time to listen to what your child has to say. Validate the feelings and the situation <i>first</i>, then collaborate with your child to come up with a solution, if appropriate. Keep in mind that solutions may simply be about how to express and cope with the feeling. If a child rejects your attempts at help, let him or her know that the offer stands:</p> <p><i>"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it right now, but if you start to feel like it, you can come find me."</i></p>