

Written by Mrs. Fila Qasabian, from Sydney, Australia

It was the end of the year, the weather was hot, the primary students were having two weeks of swimming lessons on a daily basis and seemed to be enjoying it too. This meant for them getting out of the classroom and not having formal lessons, what they would call “bludgeing”. What they did not realize was that learning to swim was very much a part of their formal education and essential for survival in a place like Australia where we are surrounded by water.

On one of those days, I happened to be passing by the window of one of the classrooms, and one teacher was painstakingly going over what the children were expected to remember when they went swimming. The exasperation in her voice suggested that this was not the first time she was saying it, that no one seemed to hear, or take note. Yet there was some urgency and seriousness about the way she approached it. I suppose because she realized that their safety was her responsibility, and their ability to listen and hear could be the difference between safety and the lack of it or even in extreme situations, the difference between “life and death”.

Later on in the staff room, this particular teacher was bemoaning the fact that the students “just don’t seem to hear, they are not listening”. “I don’t know how to say it so they can ‘hear’ what I’m saying”. “No wonder I am hoarse by the time I get back from swimming, I have to say the same thing over and over and over again, especially with such and such a person”, “I am exhausted”. She was genuinely distressed at this, and wanted to do something about it because of its obvious implications to her as a teacher, and because of her moral and legal responsibility towards her charges. It is obvious that some children will have no trouble in hearing and taking heed and acting on instructions. What then is it that makes the difference between one person listening and hearing, and taking note, and another “not hearing” what is being said?

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Listening is a skill that we learn along with reading writing and thinking and many other things as we are growing up. There are many skills that we can learn any time in our lives: as adults we learn to cook, to play golf, to do woodwork and many other things. There are skills that are best learnt during childhood, and listening is one of them. This does not mean that we cannot do this later on, we can, but the sooner we start on this, the better it is, because through teaching our children to listen we also give them many other gifts as well.

But wait a minute, what is this you call a skill? There’s nothing wrong with my hearing you say!! I can hear fine and I listen to whatever I want whenever I want, and I’m quite happy with the way my hearing has been to date and still is! No one has complained yet. I am not that old that I cannot hear yet!

But listening goes way beyond hearing what is being said. Listening shows the other person that we care, that what they have to say counts and is important, no matter how trivial it sounds. Listening says “you are valued”, “you are precious”, “you count”, “what you say matters”. “What you say comes from who you are, therefore it stands to reason that if I hear what you say, then it means I give value to your person”.

This, however does not mean that I have to agree with everything you say, nor that all you have to say is right or that it makes sense. You could be a very strange person with very strange ideas, so I do not have to like them or approve of them or follow them. What I do have to do is acknowledge that this is what you have said, and that I heard you and I respect the fact that this is what you think, but thanks no thanks I don't like it very much.

This we can do in many different ways. We can tell the other person exactly what we think "excuse me, but I think you're off you rocker", "I've never heard such utter nonsense in all my life", "which zoo did you escape from?", "where on earth do you come up with such crazy ideas, I'll never know", "keep your stupid (bright, nonsense, far out) ideas to yourself", "that's dumb", or we keep silent, which may be even worse.

The above interaction will effectively tell the other person what we think, that we heard what was said, and that we do definitely not like it. But what of the effect it has on the other person? Here the questions that beg asking are: "Do we really care about the feelings of the other person? Do we actually want to make them feel bad? Does this make us feel better? Do we feel more superior?" What's more, what kind of response are you likely to get from the other person. Do you think it will be a kind one, a polite one, or could it be one on the same level as the one you just dished out? How the will you respond? Where will this interaction take you?

If we care for the way the other person feels, we then must be a little more sensitive about the way we respond to a very far out, or strange or even a stupid idea or opinion. Remember, we do not have to like what is being said, nor approve of it, nor do we have to follow it. We can say something like: "Let me see if I heard you correctly, did you just say that... (the sun sets in the south, or people have three ears, or dogs are not barking any more because of some new rules etc.)". We then wait for the other person to negate or accept what we just said. We then proceed very gently to say that, while this is the way they see it, and it might be interesting, there is either no proof or that in our experience it is not so; but that we are open to the possibility of it being true, and at the same time, reserving the right to think what we wish to think, and get all the proof that we require to satisfy ourselves.

I would like you to think about a person you value very highly, perhaps a community leader, or a leading figure in your life, a religious figure that you admire, a hero that you adore, a writer whose works you value. Now imagine this person came to visit you in your house and wanted to talk to you, how will you behave? How will you treat this person? How are you likely to show them that you value them? That is, after you filled them up with a lot of good food and other delicacies. Will you want to hear what they have to say? How will you show them that you actually heard what they said, that you value what they said? Just think about it. All this also translates into respect or lack of it.

When we respect the other person, we are not saying that what he said is right, or good, or correct, or valuable – unless, of course, we genuinely feel that way about it. We are not showing respect for the ideas or opinions or what he said, we are showing respect for the person. And every person deserves that basic respect that we can give as one human being to another, and what's more, every person has the right to his opinions, no matter what.

We must realize that if this person is saying something stupid or silly or far out or degenerate, there are many reasons for him to do so. It could very well be that this person is really stupid, in which case it is not his fault and we might reconsider keeping company with him in the future. It could also be that he is trying to provoke deliberately, in which case we must have enough good judgment not to get tangled up in a futile argument. It could also be that he is trying to see where we stand with a certain topic, in which case we must judge the situation and decide if we are going to give away our position. It could be for many other reasons that are only clear to the other person and not us. In which case it is a challenge to us to be on our guard and respond with presence of mind and respect for ourselves and our needs, and also for privacy and respect for the other person without abusing or putting down.

Respect then is a basic premise from which we start. If we were to respect this person, our very favorite person, and really hear what he is saying, he might feel important and valued, and will be more encouraged to say other things. Of course it is up to us as to what kind of person we listen to, and what kind of person we keep company with. If we do not value the opinion of the other person, and do not listen, what's more we ask him to keep quiet, or to stop talking or we talk over him, then we are giving a very clear message: that what he is saying is not important. The result of this might be different things. If this person has a good sense of himself, then he will not bother about our attitude, he will stop talking and go and talk to someone else who is willing to listen to him. But he might get very upset and depressed and lose his sense of himself, he might even get abusive, verbally or physically, he might feel humiliated. It depends very much on the person.

***What does all this have to do with listening or learning to listen?***

***A lot!***

A person's sense of himself develops as he is growing up, and continues on developing through life's different experiences. As parents we have huge obligations to give our children a good basis for their sense of themselves. This is a gift of immense value. If a child grows feeling OK about himself, then he will be able to deal with most things in life; if not he will constantly look for approval, and at times in the wrong places.

If he does not have a good sense of himself, it will hurt and this might lead him to want to cover the pain, make it go away in any way he can. For adults, one way to cover pain could be through addiction. For children one way to cover pain is by acting out, being naughty and looking for extra attention at all the wrong times and in all the wrong ways.

We can become addicted to anything that will alter our moods or feelings or state of mind. Anything at all. Even hard work. Anything that stops us thinking and feeling the pain. The pain of who we are not and the pain of the trapped self that cannot come out and the pain of not feeling valued enough. For one of our basic human needs is to be valued for who we are. Children can become "addicted" to misbehaving, eating the wrong foods, television which will put them in a trance, or anything else for that matter.

The other reaction to not feeling valued could be depression, at times severe depression. This

can happen even to children and we must watch out for that and look for help if this happens. When we do not feel valued as human beings, it is tragic because we may never be able to reach our potential, never be able to open the package of gifts we were given at birth. For, regardless of who we are and regardless of our mental capacity or intelligence level or level of schooling, we all have a unique and specific gift, and can be of benefit to society and the world at large in our very special way.

Many of the problems that children exhibit and consequently take with them to adulthood, are often directly the result of not being valued as a human being in the family of origin.

Being valued does not only mean that we make sure that all the material and physical needs of the children are met. We do this as a matter of course. Nor does it mean that they get given all that they ask for, nor that they get their every whim and wish provided, nor does it mean that they have to have better than their friends, or more expensive things or the latest toys or the latest designer labels. All this is secondary and immaterial. If children's sense of self is being established according to material things, it is indeed sad, for it is not innate and hence very fragile.

Being valued does not mean that children control what happens at home. Just remember that children are very good at controlling in ways we did not even know could be possible. Parents must keep a step ahead of their children and be aware of the games that are being played and more importantly aware of the children's real needs.

What it does mean is that the children have firm boundaries in which to explore who they are and their environment, that they feel safe with their parents, at home and with their families and friends. You would be surprised how many children do not feel safe even at home, and they have nowhere to go to feel safe and no one to talk to about it. It also means that the parents care enough to show the children in different ways that they are valued. As we mentioned before, one important way is by listening to them, really hearing what they have to say.

When a child is born, a mother knows instinctively what the child needs when he cries. "He sounds hungry, he sounds like he's not well, it sounds like a dirty nappy to me, he sounds like he's ready for sleep, he wants attention..." The child has communicated effectively what his needs are and the mother heard. It is here that we learn to listen to our children, but somehow we stop to do so when they start using words. Not only do we stop listening, but we also model to them how not to listen to others or not to take note by saying things like: "Don't take note of what they are saying, don't pay any attention to him, we don't listen to those things in our family, he didn't mean what he said, don't take it so seriously, pretend you didn't hear or notice, don't give him the satisfaction of knowing that you heard him..." These anti-listening lessons are constant and we do it as a matter of course in our lives. Is it any wonder then that our children do not learn to listen, not even to us, especially when it counts!

When a child is born, if he cannot cry—the only way he communicates—he is not likely to get all his needs met at the right time. It is then essential to get the adult in his life to "hear" what the child is saying so he can literally survive to grow up to continue the human race. If a child cries and the mother always changes the nappy only, or feeds him only or cuddles him only,

then the child's needs are not being met. It is therefore important to "hear" the child's cry and to "know" what it is about. A mother becomes very good at knowing what it is about after a little practice, she becomes good at non-verbals, and hopefully will attend to them so the child survives. Children are a lot of hard work and very demanding at that too!

Why is it then that parents stop being good at listening, or stop wanting to hear what is being said to them by their children. Some parents say that "my child has become a stranger to me, I no longer know what he is doing, I don't know what he's thinking, I think I've lost him". They take this as being the norm, it is what all other children are doing.... What parents do not realize is that their children are telling them every step of the way what is going on, only if they learn to listen and hear. Children want their parents to know what they are doing and what they are thinking, but if time after time they are met with an attitude of "go and leave me alone, I'm tired; or, go and watch TV and let me get on with my work," then children will give up and go to someone who will listen to them. This could be their friends, an older person who does not have the child's interest at heart, anybody who makes them feel heard or understood, or accepted, and it is not necessarily someone who is good for them or really cares for them. As a teenager put it: "My friends listen to what I say, but my parents only hear me talk".

When our children talk to us we need to listen, we need to hear what they are saying. Researchers found that 75% of verbal communication is ignored. We need to learn to listen with our ears and eyes, need to hear with our ears and hearts, need to understand with our brain and soul, need to interpret with our intellect and spirit, need to advise with our experience and wisdom. But we really need to learn to listen and hear.

We are all intuitive, we need to make use of it. But before we do, we need to ask the question of how much we care. Do we care enough to start wanting to make changes? Do we care enough to start taking notice? Do we care enough to say that we had it wrong so far but we can improve on it? It is never too late to start. It is never easy to start either. It is very difficult to change a lifetime of learning, but not impossible. Can we be bothered to stop long enough, turn the television off and hear what our children are saying with their words, with their movements, with their looks, with their actions, with their presence or absence, with the tone of their voice, with their facial expressions?

Are we prepared to hear the love in their voices, the need for attention, the fear of we don't know what, the longing for whatever? Can we be there to guide them along the path with courage to help them face their own demons, insecurities, doubts, fears, hurts? Will we take the time to hear what they do not tell us in words? Are we willing to be there for them, really there? For I must warn you, when we are prepared to do all that, we also start a journey of our very own. We risk to become involved in a process the outcome of which is uncertain, and has high costs of commitment and involvement, but has rewards that are priceless.

The distinction between merely hearing and really listening is great. The word listen is made up of two Anglo-Saxon words. One is *hlystan*, which means "hearing", the other is *hlosnian*, which means "to wait in suspense". Listening is therefore a combination of hearing what the other person says, and a suspenseful waiting, an intense psychological involvement with the other person.

In order to be a good listener, it is important for us to have a good model to follow. Some of us are lucky enough to have had this model in our parents as we were growing up. Our listening skills developed along with other skills: like learning to walk and talk and eat by ourselves and use the toilet. Those of us who were not so lucky then will need to learn it all by ourselves. There are some basic things we can start with, willingness is a big thing of course, then we can improve our attending skills, learning how to continue listening and also see if we heard right.

When we listen to our children, we teach them to listen to us and others.

How then do we listen to our children? The same way we would listen to a valued guest who was visiting us for a very short time and has pearls of wisdom to impart to us. Having children is a lot of hard work, but it can be a lot of fun too. It all depends on our attitude. When you look at it in terms of our children being entrusted to us for short periods of time so we can be their guardians and their primary educators, then we begin to realize the responsibility on our shoulders.

Our children are not objects to be shown off, to be controlled, to be neglected or used like a possession. Our children are real human beings who are in the process of becoming adults. They do not suddenly grow up and are expected to behave in a responsible way, they have to be taught how to do so as they are growing up every step of the way. If we have the right attitude about it then we can have a lot of fun along the way as well as do a lot of growing of our own too, for our children can teach us a lot too. Actually they are sent to help us learn about ourselves and do our own growing as we go.

Think about it, if you have more than one child, see how different they are to each other, and stop for a minute to see how each will challenge you. But we do not see that. All we see is that this child is different and has to be made to be like the rest of us or that he will have to be made to be like his father or in case of a girl like her mother, or an image of what we ourselves think an ideal girl or boy should be! We often fail to see the uniqueness of our children and are sometimes afraid when they say things that remind us of our own past mistakes or an attitude that is not accepted in our circles. We proceed out of that fear and make decisions out of fear and not out of understanding. We refuse to discuss the point, to explore the ideas further, to find out where our children got those ideas, or why they express themselves that way. Our fear says: "You have to change that attitude". And we proceed to take action to make them change; like forbidding them to see certain people, changing school so they are no longer with certain people, trying to control their actions, punishing them for certain things they do. What we do not do is give them a voice to explore all those ideas and attitudes, and therefore deny ourselves the opportunity to really know our children and give them the benefit of our own experience.

It is important for us to realize that we can never protect our children from the world indefinitely. They have to learn to make their own path in the world one day. They have to learn to walk by themselves. They have to learn to make their own mistakes and learn from them too. Just remember, if we are trying to protect them from making the same mistake we made, ask why? Did we not survive it? Did we not learn from it? We are here, and that's living proof that we can survive and so will our children. We need to be there to walk with them and not stop them experiencing life.

## | Are You Listening?

When we learn to listen to our children, it does not mean that we have to fix things up for them, to make things better, to change things, because reality dictates that quite often we cannot. What's more our children don't necessarily want us to. They just don't want to be alone in it, they want to know that there is someone there who understands, who will listen and accept and not judge, while they go about the business of living the natural consequences of their actions. This is very hard to learn, but if we can, it will give great dividends, and bring us closer to our children.

Sometimes listening to our children is all they want us to do. Not give advice, not tell them what they are doing is wrong, nor how to do it better or differently. Just listen, unless of course they do ask for advice or our opinion. Sometimes that's all it takes for them to know how to do what's right! Sounds impossible! It is not! How well are we listening now? How much do I hear what my children are saying? What does it matter to me? Can I turn the television off long enough to hear them or to make them talk to me? Can I stop what I am doing long enough to make them feel valued? The remote control is the greatest thing that was created since television. Let's learn to use it effectively. Let's stop our children from listening to unfavorites and get them started to listen to us. But first we must learn to listen to them right now, no matter how young they are.

Our children want our attention, they want to be valued by their parents more than anyone else in the world. If we don't give them the attention now in the manner that they require or need, then they will find a way of getting all of our attention later on by doing what we will never approve of and getting into trouble, so it becomes impossible to ignore them. Let's start valuing them from the moment they are born and never stop to do so, always with great respect for who they are, special guests of great importance in our lives who were given to us to teach us valuable lessons.