

## Seek First to Understand - Empathic Listening

Many a parent will say "Of course I understand what their going through, I was there once!". What many of us fail to see is that you are not your child and you cannot understand their world unless you choose to see it from their eyes and not from your own experiences. To demonstrate this, if you were to show it to several people they would all describe what they see and invariably it would be different from what you see. Perception is subjective for each person.

But what's this got to do with listening? If we begin to prescribe an antidote before diagnosing the problem then your child (or for that matter anyone) will not feel understood and will more than likely reject your advice. Steven R. Covey said

(1997).

Empathic listening involves **suspending** your emotions, response and needs to gain an understanding of the other person's need. You step out of your shoes (and perspective) and step into the other's to gain understanding. It takes effort, concentration and willingness to actively listen (without preparing our response in our heads). But it's worth it, is it not? Because if they feel understood, then they will be willing to understand us!

So let's step through this process. Suppose over the last few days you've sensed that your son is unhappy but every time you've asked what's wrong he's replied "Nothing. I'm OK". Finally, in the afternoon in the car, he says "The disco's on Thursday night and everyone's talking about it and they want me to ask Susie to the disco but I don't want to. Everyone's telling me she really likes me but I don't know if she does".

What would you say? Would you say...

*"Don't worry about it honey. Everything will die down"*

*Or "What's wrong with asking Susie? Of course she likes you, you're a good looking boy!"*

*Or "Why wouldn't you want to ask her, what's*

What do you see?  
A Native American  
Indian or an  
Eskimo?



***To listen empathically you need to reflect back what the speaker has said, identifying key feeling words.***

*wrong with her anyway?"*

*Or "They must really think you're cool to be asking Susie out"*

Anyone of these may be a typical response **but not an understanding one**. They're advising, evaluating, probing, interpreting and all what we'd call road blocks to understanding. So instead (in this example) you would reflect back what you're hearing and their feeling...

*"You're uncomfortable being in the spotlight and afraid that Susie will say no".*

Then he might respond with..

*"Yes, and it's just too much pressure for me, why can't they just lay off!"*

Again the response should be to reflect back:

*"You feel pushed into doing something and you don't like it".*

He might say yes or he may say no and go onto trying to give you a clearer picture of what's going on. What you will get by doing this is a child who now has someone who understands them and by doing this their emotional temperature is relieved (imagine a thermometer going down). You can then help them to find a solution (which will be discussed in Problem Solving Pro-active Powerful Parenting article).

So, your Home Play - should you choose to take it (WARNING - you can't gain a skill just by reading it, you need to practice) is to look for an opportunity in your child where you see their emotional temperature has gone up or down and try to step into their shoes and understand what is happening for them, then feed it back to them to see the results. Until next time, I'll leave you with this quote..



Between Stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.