

Educators and Parents as
"Counselors": Skills for
Meeting Gifted Kids
Where They Are

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Skills for Gifted Kids, Too

for future application as
friend, roommate, employee, boss, leader,
parent, spouse/partner

A Conversation

Tell your "listening partner" about
getting here today.
What did it involve?
What did you have to deal with?

What is the difference between
a peer conversation
and "intentional listening"
from a position of power and
potential support?

A Helping Role

**Unequal roles
and power**

Listening/Responding Skills

- Paying attention nonverbally
(nods, eye contact, body language, not turned away)
- Reflecting feelings ("That sounds very disappointing.")
- Checking for accuracy ("Let me see if I have this right.")
- Paraphrasing ("So you went over there first, but didn't stay long.")
- Summarizing ("You had a bad day, with lots of setbacks.")
- Asking open-ended questions (if any at all)
- Make statements; avoid questions
(*"Relationships can be complicated."*)

Facilitation: Unequal Roles, “Power”

- **Nonverbals, posture, attitude**
eye contact, show respect (no matter what is said), head nods, full attention, no rush, wow, ooo, um-hmm
- **Reflect back the feeling (with a statement)**
Sounds like you . . . ; That sounds awful; I can feel how upset you are; I can feel how disappointed you are; It sounds as if it hurts bad; I'm listening; I can only imagine how much it hurts.
- **Check for accuracy**
Let me see if I have this right; They're going to be leaving today? You were upset then, but not now? (Use their words: A dirty look? Complicated? Upset?)
- **Repeat what they said, but in new words**
So you've had a terrible week; Your dad was upset, and you gave up trying to explain; You got an "F" and you'
- **Ask for more (open-ended: How, What, What kind of, When)**
You said "threat." What did you mean, exactly? I don't understand. What else happened? What do you mean? Is there anyone else you're worried about? Tell me more about this. Help me understand . . .

Pay Attention Nonverbally

eye contact
respect
poise (no matter what is said)
head nods
full attention
no rush
wow
ooo
um-hmm

Tell your partner what you like to do (and what you like someone else to do as a listener) when you have a conversation with a friend.

Listener: Say nothing, except “monosyllabic” sounds.

Reflect Back the Feeling

“Sounds like you . . .”
“That sounds awful.”
“I can feel how upset you are.”
“I can feel how disappointed you are.”
“It sounds as if it hurts bad.”
“I'm listening.”
“I can only imagine how much it hurts.”

Tell your partner about a situation that happened within the last month that affected you emotionally in some way—or that you had an emotional response to.

Listener: nonverbals, reflect feelings

Check for Accuracy

“Let me see if I have this right.”
“They're going to be leaving today?”
“You were upset then, but not now?”

Use their words:

A dirty look? Complicated? Upset?)

Tell your partner about something that “happened.” You can remember it quite clearly.

Listener:
Check for accuracy, use nonverbals, reflect feelings if appropriate.

Repeat what they said, but in new words.

“So you’ve had a terrible week.”
“Your dad was upset, and you gave up trying to explain.”
“You got an “F” and you felt terrible.”

Ask for more.

“You said ‘threat.’ What did you mean, exactly?”
“I don’t understand. What else happened?”
“What do you mean?”
“Tell me more about that.”

Is there anyone else you’re worried about?

Open-ended Questioning

- Closed questions (e.g., beginning with “Did” or “Have”) can be answered with “yes” or “no” and usually do not generate conversation.
- They can “shut down” a conversation and can indicate that the questioner is not being open to hearing the student’s concerns.
- Open-ended questions provide opportunity for students to elaborate, clarify, inform, express, and be complex.
- Questions or prompts beginning with “*how*,” “*what kind*,” “*what*,” “*tell me about*” or “*help me understand*” are likely to generate complex responses.

Questions

Avoid **yes/no** questions.
Avoid **Did/Do/Does; Is/Are; Was/Were; Has/Have/Had**

What can you tell me about that?
How did it happen?
How did you feel when that happened?
What are some examples that would help us understand?
How are you feeling now?
What’s been happening?
When do you usually feel that way?
How often is this a problem?

Be aware that **questions control** the conversation. They reflect the *listener’s* agenda.

Listening is Difficult

- Listening is hard because it involves a loss of control.
- If you’re afraid of what you might hear, it feels unsafe to relinquish control.
- Even if you DO know what someone is going to say, he/she still needs to say it—and have you listen and then acknowledge it—before feeling understood.

Harnessing Our Reactivity

- How people react is not “inappropriate.”
- It may be “ineffective,” but not “inappropriate.”
- It may be perfectly understandable, given the person’s experiences in life.
- Listen, but don’t push too hard for feelings. If the person is emotionally cautious and reticent, make contact that isn’t intense.

Critical Feedback

- We are hurt most by criticism of something that feels like an important part of ourselves.
- We are especially sensitive to criticism from someone whose opinion we care about.
- When we talk to the people we’re close to about our upsets, they feel implicated.
- We’re likely to be as accepting of others as we are of ourselves. That’s why those lucky enough to be raised with self-respect make better listeners.

Emotional Reactivity

- From our FEARFUL parts
- From our WORRIED parts
- From our ASHAMED parts
- From our SAD parts
- From our LONELY parts
- From our UNHEARD parts
- Re: the concept of DIFFERENTIATION

Differentiation

When we can stay calm, poised, and not emotionally reactive when someone pushes our buttons—in our family of origin (and anyone in our life who resembles those we grew up with?)

When we can refrain from (and not be tempted to engage in) being sucked into someone else’s strong emotions.

Changing

- Changing the **teacher-student** or **teacher-parent** or **parent-child** or **spousal** or **boss-employee** relationship doesn’t mean changing the other person, but **changing our way of reacting** to that person.
- It’s not the other person’s overreaction that is your problem, but how **YOU** react to it.
- You don’t have to get upset when someone else is upset.

Active Listening: Hard Work

- **Pay attention!**
- Don’t be *distracted*.
- Give *eye contact*.
- Mumble affirmation, **validation**.
- Accept their *feelings*, **views**.
- Don’t be afraid of “**PAUSES**.”

Active Listening: Hard Work

- Be **nonjudgmental**.
- Be **calm** and poised, **no matter what**.
- Accept what they say as important from **their** perspective.
- Keep the focus on **them**, not on **you**.
- Don't **over-function!**

Thank them
for talking with you about it.

Don't fold your arms or
lean back.

Don't ...

criticize,
preach, judge,
shame,
blame,
give advice,
bombard.

Don't be upset
by **tears**.

Don't act
bored.

Don't talk about yourself.

Don't use
"should" or "shouldn't."

Don't use
"why."

Don't
be afraid of their
feelings.

Don't . . .

- Don't say "That's nothing to be upset about."
"You have no reason to feel that way."
"I know exactly what you mean."
"That happened to me once."
"Don't you think it would be better if . . ."
"What should I do?"
- Don't feel responsible for "**fixing**" them.
- Don't assume you know everything you need to know.
Let them inform/teach you.
- Don't "**catastrophize.**"

Processing . . . ANYTHING

- "How do you feel about how things are going?"
- "What is it like to be 15 these days?"
- "What was that like when he said that to you?"
- "How did you feel when the teacher said that?"

These provide a chance to articulate feelings, an important skill. If kids can step out of a situation and monitor their responses, they may be able to do that in the midst of social conflict now and in relationships in the future.

"Process" is more important than "product."

Adults Avoiding Self-disclosure

"I remember when I . . ."
"When I was your age . . ."
"I had that happen to me . . ."

The child/adolescent, **not the adult**, is the focus of the dialogue.

Attention goes to the adult—away from the child or adolescent.

The conversation changes. *Active listening helps to prevent this.*

Adults must be careful not to be a "needy" adult.

Needing continually to insert one's own experiences into the discussion may reflect an inability to focus on the needs of children.

Poise . . . and Validation

- Wow . . .
- That sounds pretty awful.
- I'm so sorry to hear that.
- How did you manage something that difficult?
- That sounds scary (frustrating, upsetting).
- It makes sense that you'd respond/feel that way.
- Many kids your age don't have a career in mind.

No need to fix the person. Struggle is not a bad thing. Focus on validating the experience. Go there *with* them. Let them teach you about their life. Give away some power . . .

"I don't have a clue . . ."

When teachers assume a **one-up** (in contrast to a **one-down**) attitude, they won't be "taught" by kids about the kids' world.

Being "**clueless**" allows the child/teen to "teach" the adult. ("I can't imagine what it would be like to be in your situation at your age.")

Taking a **non-expert** posture, and showing non-voyeuristic interest in the life of an underachiever, can be powerful in opening up dialogue ("Where do you let your intelligence show?" "My guess is that you're a complicated person." "There's probably a lot I don't understand about your life.")

"I don't have a clue."

- It's **OK to "be dumb"** about what the person is talking about.
- A "one-down," **non-expert** posture helps listeners "be taught."
- No one will teach us if we know it all . . .

Bottom line:

We don't *really* know their world.

Focusing on Strengths--Credibly

- You're a survivor. You'll survive this, too.
- You knew how to get my attention. I'm glad.
- You're a good problem-solver.
- You're very observant.
- You know what's important.
- You've got the ability to bounce back. I've seen that in you. I know it's disappointing now, though.
- You were smart enough to talk with someone.

Counselor Posture

One-down, instead of one-up (not "teaching" or criticizing or shaming or blaming or intimidating): **TEACH ME.**

- "Help me understand what . . ."
- "I have no clue what it would be like to . . ."
- "What is it like to be twelve?"
- "I can't imagine what it would be like to be in your situation right now. What is that like?"
- "What did you feel when he said that?"
- "Help us understand what being shy is like."
- "What should adults understand about substance use in kids your age?"
- "Tell me about it."
- "I'm listening."

More Admonitions

- Avoid giving **advice**.
- Avoid “rushing to solve the problem.”
- **Recognize the importance of letting them TALK.**
- Concentrate on listening (it’s hard work).
- **Enter their world.** Learn about it.
- **Don’t “psychoanalyze”** or “interpret.”
- **Normalize**, but don’t patronize.
- **Don’t say “I know exactly what you mean”** or “You shouldn’t feel sad about that.”
- “I’m so glad you’re my daughter/son.”

Statements, Not Questions

- “You sound serious.”
- “That must have been rough.”
- “It makes sense that you thought that.”
- “Adolescence is complicated.”
- “Help me understand this.”
- “I can hear that it’s been upsetting you.”
- “You made a mistake, and that’s upsetting you.”
- “You’ve had a rough week.”
- “Relationships can be complicated.”

Really Listening . . .

- Letting them grow and develop
- **Not saying, “Yes, but . . .”**
- Paying attention to more than academics
- **Helping them to smile, relax, make connections, find commonalities**
- Giving them listening/responding skills for employment, marriage, parenting
- **Letting them “be dumb,” “ask dumb questions”**

What to be Alert To

- Depression
- Suicidal ideation
(“Should I worry about you—that you’ll hurt yourself?”)
- Thoughts of violence
- Our own feelings about achievement
- Our own feelings about underachievement
- Responding only with punishing
- **Having only a simplistic view**
- Questioning whether they “really are gifted”
(as teacher, counselor, parent)

Can we rein in our preoccupation with performance?

(in honor of a more complete view and
a more complex relationship?)

Messages of Hope: Credible Optimism

- I know you’ll figure this out. I’m not sure when—maybe soon, maybe later. But it’s a problem to be solved, and you’ve got the ability to do that. I’ll support you.
- **You’ll figure out** how to get what you need.
- You’re strong (stronger than you think) and adaptable.
- **You’ve shown in the past** that you are resilient. You bounce back.