

Can You Hear What I Am Not Saying?

All parents experience struggles with their children. When my children were young, I often felt like a fireman, directing my attention toward one fire only to turn around and start dousing another. Recently, a number of clients came into session describing their own trails with their children. Three-year-old Sara was refusing to follow directions from her teacher and was defiant at home. The adults around her were trying their best to get her to listen to them. Five-year-old David was acting aggressively toward his classmates, despite his teacher scolding him and his frequent time-outs. Ten-year-old Esther was crawling into her parents' bed in the middle of the night and being greeted with their frustration, they're telling her she's not a baby, and ordering her back to her room. Parenting challenges like these are universal. As parents, striving to parent more consciously, we want to attune to what our children are saying, not with their words but with their behaviors.

In our interactions with others, it is very easy to get stuck on content, the literal words, rather than the underlying feelings and needs. It requires self-awareness and practice to realize the multiple layers of communication that occur simultaneously. When I hear of acting-out behavior a child is exhibiting, the first thing I ask is, "What is that child really saying?" It often comes down to an expression of a few key needs. "I need more attention; I feel I am getting lost in the shuffle, not being heard, being misheard..." Or, "I feel angry. Something is happening that makes me feel my rights are being violated, my needs are not being met, I don't have enough areas of control." Or, "Am I really lovable? Am I important, considered good?" If we could really hear what our children are saying, our reactions to them would sound very different. For example, if Sara is reacting to feeling that she does not have enough control in her environment, then yelling at her to listen and "forcing" her into obedience is actually exacerbating her issue. Can you imagine a conversation that goes like this? Three-year-old Sara: "I want more control. I want to decide what to eat and when to sleep and what to wear..." And then parents and teachers responding: "If that's the case, we are going to make sure you have even less control. You'll go to bed extra early, sit in the corner of the classroom, not join the others when there is a fun activity." Sounds ridiculous right? You would wonder why no one is responding to this child's need.

What about David? His behavior is saying he's angry. He's seeing a lot of fighting between his parents and the anger scares him. He gets punished severely when he doesn't listen. He has a hard time sitting and focusing for long periods and the teacher is often reprimanding him. He throws a block at a classmate, grabs what's not his, squirms in his seat, all of which are behaviors that are communicating he's angry or unsettled. What then is the response around him? His adults become angry. Instead of seeing his anger and offering him outlets and tools for dealing with his feelings, he is yelled at and punished. The adults around him want the behaviors to stop but they are not really hearing him; they are not really hearing what he is not saying.

How can we help our children communicate with us and others more effectively? The first tool is to help them identify what they are feeling. For example, consider when David yells to his mother, "I hate you!" If she were listening for the message behind his words, she might respond, "You sound angry. What is making you so angry? It is not respectful to say 'I hate you' to your mother but it is OK to let me know you're angry."

What about Esther? When Esther crawls into her parents' bed in the middle of the night, although they find it very irritating, they can try to understand more and ask, "Honey, what's going on right now? What are you feeling?" "I'm scared to be in my room" could be Esther's answer. "You sound anxious. What happens when you wake up alone in your room and it's dark? What do you start thinking?" And then, "What would help you to feel more relaxed in your own bed?" and begin a problem-solving process. Irritation can now give way to compassion.

There's something magical that happens when we hear what our children are really saying and respond to them from this deeper place. The acting-out behaviors are no longer necessary. Our children develop tools for understanding their feelings and containing them. They learn that they can communicate without fear of judgment or retaliation. And sometimes we get the same sensitivity back. I had walked into the house after a long day of work and snapped with irritation at my seventeen-year-old son who had left something lying around. My immediate trigger was to think how careless he was and I expressed my frustration and anger. He was sorry and corrected his mistake. After a few minutes he put his hands on my shoulders and asked "Are you tired mom? Did you have a hard day?"

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