



# *Tips for Becoming a Better Listener*

## *Skills for Successful Teachers*

by Ron Partin

- To be a successful listener you must be genuinely interested in what the student has to say. If you don't have time at the moment, offer to talk with the student later.
- In a counseling role listen non-judgmentally, achieving what Carl Rogers termed, "unconditional positive regard." By the time a student comes to their teachers with a problem they have probably had advice and lectures from others. They often just need someone who cares who will listen for a few minutes. Nothing nips trust like critical judgment and negative labeling. Beware of conveying disapproval through your tonality, leading questions, or non-verbal responses.
- The next time you have a student sitting knee-to-knee in front of you with tears streaming down his or her cheeks, resist the urge to give advice or sugar-coated reassurance. Just take time to listen, compassionately. Follow the adage, "Talk a little less; listen a little more."
- Become comfortable with silence in a counseling relationship. These pauses can create valuable reflection time for students.
- Use a variety of listening skills. Paraphrasing is restating a student comment in your own words. It tends not to include the reference to feelings which are included in reflections of feeling. Good clarifying questions, used sparingly, can be most helpful in encouraging students to examine the causes and possible solutions to their problems.
- Be sure your non-verbal messages are congruent with your verbal ones. Although there are some cultural exceptions, for most students offer direct eye contact while the student is talking. It helps establish trust and communicates interest. Leaning forward is also interpreted as an expression of concern and interest.
- Brief responses such as "Mm-hm" or "I see." or "Go on." are useful in communicating that you are still with the speaker. Occasional head nods also encourage the student to continue.
- Avoid finishing the statements of others. Besides being rude, it also communicates impatience and a lack of interest. More importantly, it's lazy listening. Sometimes, you will just be wrong in your interpretation. It's also generally best not to interrupt the speakers unless they begin to ramble. Then you might inject a clarifying phrase or question.
- Invest in rapport building with your students by listening to them when they don't have serious problems. Acknowledge and validate their positive feelings, as well as the negative ones (e.g., "You're really excited about making the team." or "You must be very proud of your award.").

- Study outstanding listeners, in your daily life and in the public media. Larry King and Barbara Walters are good models to observe. Note their non-verbal posture and the quality of their open-ended questions.
- Reflective listening is also a valuable technique to employ with angry students or adults. You are not getting into the blame game. You are neither saying, “You’re wrong!”, nor are you saying, “I’m wrong.” By listening to their feelings (for example, “You’re pretty upset with the way your child has been treated.”) you are simply communicating that you are listening to them at the deepest level. It is like verbal judo. Instead of meeting force with force, you are letting their anger dissipate into the wind. Once the angry person has vented their feelings and you refuse to get caught up in a shouting match they will begin to calm down.
- Avoid the “Have you tried \_\_\_\_\_?” trap. Most students will respond with “I tried that.” or “It won’t work because....” They will wait for you to suggest one more solution so they can chop it down. It creates a no-win game.

From: R.L. Partin (1995). *The teacher’s classroom survival guide*.  
Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

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