



## LISTEN GESTURE

To listen is a gesture we practice every day. For all children, especially those who have experienced traumatic stress and violence, a patient and receptive adult who listens can help them feel safe and valued.

Seth A. Horowitz, an auditory neuroscientist and author of *The Science and Art of Listening*, states, “The difference between hearing and listening is in attention.” Attentively listening, or focusing on what we’re hearing, though oftentimes difficult, is the foundation of all the other Changing Minds gestures – of celebrating, comforting, collaborating, and inspiring.

Listening attentively to children shows we care and that their thoughts matter. Teaching them to listen helps embody the skills of communication, getting along and seeing others’ perspectives.

Whether children are sharing happiness, sadness, anger, or fear, having someone truly listen to them matters. Help children identify their emotions and feelings. Help them connect words to experiences, and help them learn healthy strategies to problem-solve and cope.

In this section, we discuss listening skills and ideas including the importance of being patient, listening without distractions, and allowing children to share when they are ready.

See the [short films](#), inspired by real stories, that emphasize the value of listening to a student who has something to say but feels like they are not being heard.

### Age-Related Tips

Children at different age groups may need different considerations when listening to them.

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#### **Infants & Toddlers**

- Listen to children at this age by bending down or sitting on the floor with them to make them feel safe and comfortable.
  - Pay attention to their body language and nonverbal cues, or even to their drawings — sometimes telling you more than what they are or are not saying.
  - Be patient. Young children might need some extra time and space to express themselves.
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#### **Elementary/Middle School**

Encourage children of this age to express their feelings, particularly when they show nonverbal signs of negative emotions: a slumped posture, tiredness, or certain facial expressions. Young children often express themselves through play or art, and these activities can offer insight into what they are feeling.

- Be patient. Processing experiences and emotions can take time and children may need to talk about certain topics multiple times.
- Be open to their ideas and opinions. Repeat back what they have said to you to make sure you have understood them correctly.



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- Practice supportive listening when children are talking about difficult topics.
    - Help them express their thoughts and make sense of their experience.
    - Allow them to share their story without interruptions.
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## Teens

If a teen wishes to talk about a difficult topic, supportive listening helps them express their thoughts and make sense of their experience.

- Pick a safe place to talk during an activity, while playing video games or a sport, or while driving in a car.
- Give them time to express themselves.
  - Allow them to share their story without interruptions, show interest, and be alert for moments of honesty and vulnerability.
  - Give them time to express themselves before offering advice or help. Sometimes they will be more encouraged to express themselves when you are not looking directly at each other.
- Ask open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer.
- Respond to their emotions with your body language and restate what you heard them say

## Environment-Related Tips

When listening to children, no matter where you are, remember to be patient, give them your full attention, and respond with open-ended questions based on their age-level.

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## At School

Listening is an everyday gesture that can be reinforced in the school setting.

- Create a positive classroom climate by establishing rules and norms that support respectful listening among all members of the school community.
  - Create processes that allow all students a chance to share and be heard.
  - Remain curious and ask supportive questions. For example, “Which part of getting your homework done is hard?” and “Why is that part hard?” instead of, “Why didn’t you do your homework?”
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## In the Community

Community members can often play a key role as an objective listener in a child’s life.

- Physically show them that you are present by removing physical barriers such as phones, notebooks, or paperwork. Show them, by your actions, that what they have to say is worthy of your full attention.
- Coaches, listen and take physical or emotional complaints seriously. This will help children see you as someone they can go to in times of need.
- Social workers, be sure to stay open and curious. Show children that you care about what happened to them, and not just “what’s wrong with them.”



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## **In Health Care Settings**

It is important that professionals listen carefully to children in these settings, especially to those expressing fear and uncertainty about their condition or situation.

- Make eye contact and show children that you're interested about what's bothering them.
- Remove physical barriers such as computers or medical equipment to provide your full attention.
- Ask normalizing questions to elicit responses. For example, "A lot of kids I see are experiencing XYZ. Might that be going on for you?" or "Given how common XYZ is, we have begun to ask all our patients about it. Is this something that's going on with you?"

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## **At Home**

Show children at home that their thoughts and opinions are worthy of your full attention.

- Remove physical barriers to conversations such as cell phones and the TV.
- Listen also to what they are *not* saying — listen for what's underneath the behavior.
- If your child isn't ready to talk, reassure them that you'll be there when they're ready. Stay physically close when appropriate.

## **Why it Works**

For all children, especially those who have been exposed to violence and who have experienced traumatic stress, listening is especially important because it helps you understand what they need to feel safe. It also shows them that they can trust the adults around them, establishing the foundation for pro-social strategies to express their emotions.

Listening with respect and empathy shows a child that they are worthy. Listening helps children feel supported, increases their self-esteem, and helps them view the world as a safe place to express themselves.<sup>1,2</sup>

Children who experience traumatic stress often need help to describe and recognize both positive and negative emotional states.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating a calm and supportive approach through your tone and body language supports children in regulating their emotions. Being curious and reflecting back what you are hearing helps children build executive function and self-regulation skills, which are both necessary for building resilience.

Over time, listening can help children heal. By listening to children, caring adults can act as buffers against the impacts of witnessing violence and experiencing childhood trauma. Practice and share the Listening gesture tips and these 5 key recommendations for listening to children of all ages:

1. Listen attentively and actively.
2. Listen without distractions.
3. Be patient and allow them time to share when they are ready.



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4. Pay attention to their emotions and feelings.
5. Validate their feelings and emotions.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Masten, A. (2009). Ordinary Magic: Lessons from Research on Resilience in Human Development. Education Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/EdCan-2009-v49-n3-Masten.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, E. (2013). Interrupting trauma and advancing development: considering parent education in contemporary psychoanalytic treatment. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 41(84). doi:10.1007/s10615-012-0412-3.

<sup>3</sup> Pool, C.R. (1997). Up with emotional health. *Social and Emotional Learning. Educational Leadership* 54(8): 12- 14.

[Activate Your Community](#)

[Taking Care of Yourself](#)