



EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH CONNECTION

MOVING LIVES FORWARD

DON'T SWEAT OR SOLVE IT - JUST LISTEN

Life as we've known it has changed so much in so many ways this past year. Even for us who are experienced in dealing with stress and crisis, it's been a challenge. Of course, our larger concern is what will be the impact of COVID on our children e.g. as it pertains to their mental health.

There are some basic beliefs in childhood mental health work:

- 1) Optimal growth and development occur within nurturing relationships.
- 2) The birth and care of a baby offer a family the possibility of new relationships, growth and change.
- 3) What happens in the early years affects the course of development across the lifespan.
(Stinson, Tableman & Weatherson, 2000)

How do we provide "optimal growth and development?" One important fact to understand is that the brain is most "plastic" or change-able during infancy and childhood, but remains plastic throughout life. So how is this all relative to "active listening?" It is relative to listening because communication is how we best RELATE to one another. One can find thousands of articles on relationships that usually state that healthy communication is one of the most important aspects of a marriage, friendship and in our work world. Sadly, what we adults are good at is talking – not so much listening.

Again, in today's buzzing, social media and distracting world, it can be harder to give your children your full attention. And yes, having them home more than ever makes this even more complicated. So we need to remember that if we are feeling stressed, they are too. If we are feeling scared about world events, they are too. If we are overwhelmed, they are too.

No matter how young they are, they are like little sponges who absorb our emotions. And again, remember their brains are developing at the most rapid rate, making neuro pathways that help determine their development in social/emotional domains.

In closing, here's some suggestions to help you be a better listener:

- 1) Don't solve their problem; just listen carefully. Maybe we think we have all the answers, but usually that is not what they really want. They want to be heard and have their feelings validated.
- 2) Ask the right questions to demonstrate how engaged you are. Examples are: "Tell me more," "Then what happened," "Really?"
- 3) Put your child in the spotlight: look into his/her face; show with your body language that you are there with them. Ignore your TV and cell phone the entire time they need to explain themselves. Trust me on this one, if you do this NOW while they are young, it will pay off when they are teenagers. This tip alone is priceless!
- 4) Pretend you are watching a movie when your child is trying to tell you something important: When doing this, we listen to understand or figure out what might happen next. Stay quiet between children's thoughts; remember they have not yet acquired the vocabulary we have. Don't guess at what they are feeling, just immerse yourself in their story. As adults we often assume we know what their world feels like; the truth is, we don't.
- 5) So, last but certainly not least, JUST LISTEN.

If you practice most of these suggestions, it will help make your relationship with your children stronger. It will help develop "optimal growth" and let your child know that they are heard. This validation is what helps children grow in their self-confidence. They will know that what they think and feel is important.

Cheryl's Corner of Caring

"Listening is an attitude of the heart, a genuine desire to be with another which both attracts and heals." (L. J. Islam)