[IMAGE]

Are You an Engaged Parent?

By Claudia Anrig, DC

As much as parents may wish it were so, children do not come with an instruction manual. There's no "how to" that can be followed and no two children are alike, so what works with one generally won't work with the next. However, there are things that can be done to let children know they are loved and accepted – they simply need to be engaged.

The Intentional Parent

Every parent knows what it's like to be busy. In the majority of households, both parents work to help sustain the family. This means family time is often compromised by work hours. Recognize the value of the (limited) time available to spend with your child. Rather than sitting at the computer, in front of the television or with a phone in hand, saying, "Uh-huh, yep, okay, sure, can you leave me alone, I'm busy," without really listening, follow these three simple rules of engagement when their child approaches them: *stop*, *look* and *listen*:

Stop what you're doing: Turn away from the computer, pause or mute the television and put down the phone. *Look at the child*: Look them in the eyes and smile at them. Dr. Ross Campbell, author of *How to Really Love Your Child*, says, "It's up to each parent to use eye contact to convey unconditional love." Then *listen to what they say*: Have a real conversation with them.

The American Psychological Association recommends letting children complete their point before responding and repeating what you heard them say to ensure you understood them correctly. Ask follow-up questions so they know you were genuinely listening. Talk "with" them, not "at" them.

parenting - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The topic could be something minor (for example, they child may just want a snack), but the fact that you stopped what you were doing and gave them your full attention will mean the world to a child. It tells them they matter and are more important than any activity you were doing.

The Talking Child

Every parent with a chatterbox child understands that sometimes, you simply want them to stop chatting. Some little ones tend to talk until they're winded and their conversations may not even make sense. You may feel like their child may never stop talking – but try to listen to them anyway.

One day, particularly as they get older, children may stop talking. The one-word answer may become common and, no matter the question, the answer may be, "Fine." When they're teens, they might not want to talk, so talk to them while they do.

No matter how much children talk, never say, "Will you just shut up already?" or "Do you ever stop talking?" Even said in a joking tone, it will sting and your little one may actually stop talking to them ... for good. Always pay attention and let your children talk while they're willing to. The long-term effect may be that as teens, they remember that their parents always listened.

Of course, if life gets in the way, it's OK to *reschedule* your talk: "I really want to hear about that, but I'm really busy with this right now. Can we talk after dinner?" If a parent never brushes off what their child wants to tell them, the child will always want to talk to them. In these moments to grab a Post-It or note card and write a reminder to ask your child to finish their story later, bring it to the dinner table, etc.

The Complimentary Parent

Children who grow up knowing they are loved may not always believe a parent's compliment. The parent may hear things like, "You have to say that, you're my mom" or "You're just saying that because you're my dad." Realistically, we tend to doubt compliments that come from people we know love us.

To help overcome this challenge, back up your compliments with facts. A compliment that includes support is easier to believe and may actually mean more because it tells your child you've been observing them and considering who they are becoming as a person.

Another great parent strategy is to compliment your child's character; for example: "You are so generous; I saw you give your little brother the last few dollars he needed to buy that action figure he wanted" or "You have so much integrity! I know it wasn't easy to tell the truth when you dropped my phone, but you did it!"

Recognize their children's efforts. Too often, parents focus on disciplining the negative, but forget to praise the positive. "I really appreciate your help setting the table; you did such a great job folding the napkins" or "Thank you for taking out the trash, it means a lot to me that you did that right away" can help build trust and self-esteem.

The point is to be sure your compliments can't be considered empty platitudes, but a clear and undeniable recognition of the positive characteristics your child is displaying. Blanket statements can be doubted, but the message will gain heart-knowledge if a parent's compliment comes with proof.

The Communicating Parent

As children get older, there will inevitably be conversations they don't want to have with their parent. It's important that you find their way around the wall of silence. The following strategies may help open the doors of communication:

- *Date Night* – Leave the cell phones and hand-held gaming devices at home and just talk.
- *Running Errands* – This is one of the best-kept secrets of parenting. Since the parent is focusing on the road, they aren't watching the child, and it becomes less intimidating for them to tell the parent things they normally might not be able to if they were looking their parent in the face.
- *Dinner Talk* – Eat at the table as a family; no television or electronics, just parents and the kids. Encourage them to talk about their day. Play "high and low" – go around the table and have each person share the best thing and worst thing that happened to them that day. Ask a different open-ended question each night – "What is something unusual that happened to you today?" "Tell me something amazing that happened today." "Complete this sentence: My day would've been awesome if..." Bring a little imagination to the dinner table.
- *Bedtime Relaxation* – Spend the last 5 minutes of the night with your child. For older children, talking to them in soothing tones about whatever topic catches their attention; for younger children, massage their feet, or rub their temples or backs. Engage with them in whatever feels comfortable, be the last thing they see before they go to sleep, and remind them they're safe. This includes infants; the American Medical Association advises parents, "Even though he doesn't understand what you're saying, your calm, reassuring voice is what he needs to feel safe."
- *Electronic Curfew* –If parents had nothing else to do (no distractions) it would be easier to engage with their children. Consider setting an "electronic curfew" in your home: set time each evening when all

electronics get turned off. With the proliferation of smartphones and hand-held gaming devices, the average child may spend *50 hours* or more in front of a screen each week. An electronic curfew may restrict this and increase the time available to converse.

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