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Conflict Between Parents, Part 3: More Strategies to Reduce Conflict, Active Listening and Looping

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In Part 1 of this article, I wrote about the effects conflict between parents can have on their children. In Part 2, I talked about a number of techniques to defuse or diminish conflict, including a few basic communication strategies. In this, the final part of the series, I'm going to talk about two more complicated, but very effective strategies: active listening and looping.

Active listening is a way of having a conversation, including really difficult conversations, in which you really listen to what the other parent is saying and check that you've understood the other parent. Active listening helps the other parent to feel genuinely heard and can significantly reduce the level of conflict. Looping is a way of having a conversation in which you work with the other parent to more fully understand what he or she is saying. Looping can slow the conversation down and usually calms high emotions in doing so. Looping also demonstrates your engagement in the conversation.

Although I discuss active listening and looping in the context of separated parentings, both strategies can be used whenever you're having a difficult conversation, for example, with a neighbour, an employer or a police officer.

Active Listening

The essential tools of active listening are *asking closed questions, asking open questions,*

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paraphrasing and *summarizing*. It usually helps to use all four tools, you'll see why in a bit, and it's usually best not to rely too much on a single tool.

Closed questions are used to quickly confirm something the other parent has said, to make sure you've got it. They give you *yes* or *no*, or other one-word answers, and rarely anything more. They also tend to suggest their answer.

"Can you drop her off half an hour early?"

"Do you still have a job?"

Open questions don't assume an answer, and ask for a lot more information as a result.

"When are you leaving for work?"

"What should we get him for his birthday?"

Open questions usually seem like requests for additional information and don't usually come across as strident or demanding. The trick in asking them is to seem, and actually be, genuinely curious about the answer.

Paraphrasing is about clarifying what the other parent has said by repeating what has been said in your own words. Paraphrasing often starts by saying something like "so what you're saying is ...," "in other words ..." and "if I understand correctly, you're saying that ..." Paraphrasing helps the other parent feel that he or she has really been heard and that you are really making an effort to listen and understand. Paraphrasing does *not*, however, mean that you agree with what the other parent is saying! You're just trying to get more information. For example, one person might say:

"I just don't know what to do. I'm pulling my hair out trying to deal with how mad the children are that they have to go to a new school. I'm crying all the time; I'm a wreck! This is so frustrating!"

One way of paraphrasing this is to say:

"It sounds like the kids are having a lot of challenges adapting and that you're having a really hard time helping them."

Paraphrasing does *not*, however, mean that you agree with what the other parent is saying!

Summarizing, the last item in the active listening toolbox, restates the important parts of what the other parent has said. It can be really useful to help sort out complicated

conversations with lots of information. Summarizing often starts by saying something like “so you’ll do ... and you’d like me to ...” or “let me check that I’ve got everything right, you’ve said that ...” Summarizing gives the other parent the opportunity to clarify and correct your understanding. Like paraphrasing, summarizing does not mean that you agree! Here’s an example of summarizing:

“Look, there’s one week left before school starts. The kids need a checkup and I need to get the school supply list. Oh, and we need to check that their vaccinations are up to date. I’ve got to return Angela’s bike and you need to find the receipt. I think Angela is going to need new soccer shoes. She needs new shin guards too. Do you remember when the kids last saw Dr. Chen?”

The basic message here is that school and soccer are starting soon and the kids need to see the doctor. This might be summarized by saying:

“Okay, so we’ve got a bunch of stuff to do to get the kids ready for school. If I’ve understood right, we need to take the kids back to Dr. Chen for a checkup and to make sure that they’ve got their shots. We need to return Angela’s bike. We also need to get Angela outfitted for her team, and you’re going to take care of the kids’ school supplies. Is that right?”

Active listening, when done correctly, is like verbal ninjutsu. It can be incredibly effective when used well. Here are some tips for good active listening:

- Be attentive and sincere. Be curious.
- Don’t interrupt, except to ask closed questions, and don’t criticize.
- Use a calm tone of voice.
- Don’t ask too many closed questions in a row.
- Be careful of how you put open questions using “why,” because *why* can come across as sarcastic or insincere.
- Don’t paraphrase all the time. Mix it up with open questions, closed questions and summarizing.

Looping

Looping is useful when there's a misunderstanding you need to clear up. Looping follows a simple five-stage formula.

Paraphrasing helps the other parent feel that he or she has really been heard and that you are really making an effort to listen and understand.

1. When the other parent has said something that you're confused or unsure about, summarize what that parent has said, and ask whether you've got it right.
2. The other parent will either confirm that you've got it right, or will clarify what you've got wrong.
3. You should then summarize what the other parent has said including the new information, and ask that parent to confirm you understand.
4. The other parent will either confirm that you understand or not.
5. If you do understand, consider asking for more information. If you don't understand, go back to stage one.

Here's an example:

You: "You've told me that you're mad because the social worker went to the wrong school and missed the appointment with Peter's teacher. Is that right?"

Other parent: "Yes, and she didn't call me about the mess up."

You: "You're mad because she missed the appointment and she didn't tell you."

At this stage there are two possible answers, *yes* or *no*. If *yes*, you might ask a follow-up like "is there anything else that's bothering you" or "what else happened?" If *no*, you might say:

You: "What am I missing? Can you help me understand?"

Then start the process again at stage one. Here are some tips for looping:

- Loop whenever there's a misunderstanding that needs to be cleared up.
- Interrupt the other parent when necessary to explore something that's causing confusion.
- Be alert to body language, as that can play a role in your understanding and be looped back to the other parent – "you just clenched your fists, are you feeling mad?"
- Remain calm even if the other parent is frustrated or mad.

The essential tools of active listening are *asking closed questions, asking open questions, paraphrasing and summarizing.*

There's a lot more to be said about looping and active listening, of course. You can look for more information on the websites of organizations interested in conflict resolution, psychology and communication.

The effects of parental conflict on children can be damaging and result in serious long-term harm. Remember that every step that protects children from conflict helps, no matter how small it is or even if it's just one parent making the effort.

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