



mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

Listening With Our Hearts

As I have thought about this article on raising healthy children, I have been acutely aware of children everywhere and especially the children in Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, and other war-torn or impoverished places. We are fortunate to be in a country where most of us don't have to worry about our children being victims of violence or witnesses to violence. Most of us don't have to worry about providing adequate food, shelter, medical care, and education for our children. However, with 30 million people living in poverty, inadequate health care, inner-city gangs, drugs and violence the picture is far from perfect even here. Is it possible to raise our children in such a way that we might contribute to a more peaceful and just world?

One of the most important things that we can do for our children and our world is to learn to listen with our hearts. Listening with our hearts means really listening to another—not only to their words, but to their feelings, expressed and unexpressed. Listening with our hearts means that we listen in order to understand the other.

All too often we “listen” only to be able to refute the other, contradict, or strengthen our own position. We are not really listening to understand, we are listening to figure out how best to make sure we are perceived as being right. At other times we may pretend we are listening so that the other person is not offended but our minds are elsewhere.


When someone is really listening to me, I feel safe and able to open my heart. If someone is interested enough to ask questions for clarification, it helps me to better understand my feelings and articulate them. When I feel I have been

really heard and understood I feel respected and valued.

When I feel heard it is easier for me to listen, perhaps even be curious about another's opinion. I want to offer them what they have given me, because I realize that mutual understanding brings us closer, which is far more important than being right.

When I have been heard and when I fully understand the other, we can work together toward an amicable outcome. Even if things don't go exactly my way, even if I don't like the agreement 100 percent, I feel validated and affirmed and closer to the other person.

When we listen to our children they feel this as well. Even the youngest child knows when someone is really attending to her. Our children need help in understanding and articulating their side. Patient listening and gentle questions help them develop their skills at speaking their truth.

By listening we also role model for them how to listen. Our children want and need to be able to trust us. They need to be able to share their fears and frustrations. They need to feel that their feelings will be treated with tenderness and respect. If they grow up feeling like they are heard and respected, they will be better able to hear and respect others. They will become peacemakers, focused on understanding and cooperation. We may not be able to stop wars and violence, we may not be able to abolish poverty, but we can take steps to make our own families peaceful places of refuge and to give our children the skills they need to make their world more peaceful and just. 

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