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Reports

Whole-Body Listening

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Listening is a skill that serves as the foundation for all good communication. One of the most common scenarios encountered in child and adolescent psychiatry is one where a child verbalizes that their parent doesn't listen, while the parent insists that they do. Whole-body listening is a framework that can be implemented by parents to engage in effective communication with their kids. Listening with the ears and eyes involves the utilization of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Listening with the heart involves showing compassion, while listening with the brain requires reading between the lines and understanding implied messages. Listening with the mouth involves reflective listening through speech to acknowledge a child's point and provide validation and empathy. Finally, listening with the hands and feet involves following up words with actions. Each component of whole-body listening builds a tangible framework for children to identify elements of listening that parents might not execute well, and for parents to use to reflect and improve their listening with an end goal of prioritizing empathy over compliance and agreement.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common clinical patterns in child and adolescent psychiatry is a child verbalizing that their parent doesn't listen to them, and the parent insisting that they do. Parents often need guidance on how to adequately communicate with their children, prioritizing understanding and empathy over demanding compliance. In this clinical perspective we introduce "whole-body listening," a term we use to describe a holistic conceptualization of what it means to listen in the context of parent–child relationships, and provide evidence for how it positively impacts communication and well-being. Our goal is to offer a tangible framework for clinicians to use with parents so they have a better understanding of comprehensive listening and can then communicate more meaningfully with their children.

WHOLE-BODY LISTENING FRAMEWORK

In the Whole-Body Listening Framework, each part of the body has a unique ability to perceive, evaluate, and reflect on information that is expressed by others. We argue that there are many components to listening, and the framework of whole-body listening illustrates this concept. In the following sections, we describe how different parts of the body capture various components of listening, and how combining these components helps clinicians guide parents in effective listening and communication with their children.

LISTEN WITH THE EARS

Listening with the ears involves the transmission of external auditory stimuli to the brain. In the 1960s, a UCLA psychology professor conducted experiments that investigated the perception of different emotions based on words or phrases spoken in various tones of voice with distinct facial expressions. He created what is known as the 7/38/55 ratio of communication: 7% of communication is verbal, 38% is transmitted through tone of voice, and 55% is transmitted nonverbally through body language and facial expressions.[1] Thus, in the context of parent–child communication, only 7% of listening involves the interpretation of a child's words and another 38% is transmitted by recognizing differences in prosody of speech. Affective prosody is the variation in rate, rhythm, pitch, and volume which allows individuals to express emotion in speech. Is a child yelling? Are they crying? Are they talking with a cheerful tone? Is their voice stern? These cues play a significant role in conveying messages that words alone do not capture. Listening with the ears provides a rudimentary approach for parents to not only hear spoken words, but also interpret emotion through visceral intonation.

LISTEN WITH THE EYES

Nonverbal communication is the largest component of the 7/38/55 ratio and involves the interpretation of body language and facial expressions. Is a child furrowing their eyebrows? Are their arms crossed over their chest? Are they avoiding eye contact? Children can often hide their feelings with their words, but they are less adept at hiding with their body language. The perception–action model describes how perception and action share networks in the brain allowing an observer to resonate with the emotional state of another person by simply "listening" with their eyes.[2] Nonverbal communication is a more honest form of communication because body language, unlike words, represents a real-time reaction unencumbered by conscious thinking in the brain.[3] Visual stimuli are principal conveyers of affective communication which demonstrates the value of listening with the eyes.

LISTEN WITH THE HEART

Listening with the heart is a more abstract concept in the framework of whole-body listening, as the heart, in this case, represents empathy. This involves stepping into another person's shoes with an intention to feel what they might be feeling while recognizing their emotions. Mirroring is a concept linked to compassion as it is a key component of "bottom-up" processing, allowing stimuli to shape perception.[4] Mirror neurons are suggested in research studies to be involved in understanding the intentions and actions of others.[5] Parents can mirror their child's emotions and body language, allowing them to feel what their child is feeling, thus generating empathy. A parent's actions can also activate mirror neurons in the child's brain such that if a parent is frowning because they are sad, the child may feel the same emotion. In this way, humans have an intrinsic ability to feel what others are feeling. Listening with the heart and showing empathy to children will foster trust and a healthy parent–child relationship.

LISTEN WITH THE BRAIN

Listening with the brain requires higher cognitive processing to interpret and evaluate verbal and nonverbal information while subsequently synthesizing meaning. It involves interpreting implied messages without the words being explicitly stated. To understand a child's feelings and point of view in different scenarios, it is important to recognize and appreciate what is happening and why it's important to them. Listening with the brain can have concrete neurobiological and psychological effects for a child. Research has shown that feeling understood enhances personal and social well-being.[6] The experience of feeling understood also activates brain regions associated with reward and social connection, whereas not feeling understood activates brain regions associated with emotional distress. Listening with the brain requires strong inferential skills, taking indirect evidence and constructing hidden meaning from it. This foundation of understanding between parents and children builds transparency and emotional well-being.

LISTEN WITH THE MOUTH

Listening with the mouth involves reflective listening through speech. A core principle of this approach is verbal mimicry, or repeating things back to another person. Researchers have found that verbal mimicry can increase prosocial behaviors such as helping others and sharing.[7] The first step involves repeating a child's words to demonstrate that they have your attention; secondly, confirming that a child's point was understood by saying "Is it right? Tell me more."; and lastly, validating emotions and expressing empathy by saying something like "it is upsetting" or "I hear you, see you, and feel for you." In the first instance, by using the word "it" rather than "you or I," parents acknowledge emotions in a neutral way and avoid judgment or wrong conclusions. Taking these steps can create a sense of emotional safety and distance, allowing children to discuss vulnerable emotions more comfortably. Reflective listening through speech is an integral component of whole-body listening and takes the basic act of hearing words to a more complete and comprehensive level.

LISTEN WITH THE HANDS AND FEET

The final, and perhaps the most important, piece of whole-body listening is listening with the hands and feet: following up words with compassionate actions. This means asking a child "what can I do for you?" Listening with the hands and feet demonstrates commitment. It avoids empty promises while acknowledging the issue at hand, finding solutions, and addressing challenges to achieve the desired outcome. Notably, one research group has studied how actions carry greater currency than words do, finding that behavior is more valuable to individuals because it's a more reliable measure of reality and can be observed by others.[8] Listening with the hands and feet demonstrates the highest level of whole-body listening, and it is a crucial final stage to complete the Whole-Body Listening Framework.

CONCLUSION

The Whole-Body Listening Framework provides a practical and tangible tool for parents to improve communication with their children. It enables kids to point out specific elements of listening that their parents might not execute very well so that parents can then improve their skills and be intentional in how they listen and communicate. This framework emphasizes the importance of understanding a child's perspective and prioritizes empathy for emotional needs rather than solely seeking compliance or agreement, with the ultimate goal of improving communication between parents and children.

Take Home Summary

Whole-body listening offers a tangible framework for parents to engage in meaningful conversation with children. It emphasizes the importance of understanding a child's perspective while prioritizing empathy, rather than solely seeking compliance or agreement as the goal.

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