

STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN

How can we help children develop more robust mental health? Parenting coach Julia Philpott believes active listening can make all the difference

In this world of ever-present technology, accelerating pace of life and increasing mental health issues, many parents are concerned about how to bring up their children to be resourceful, responsible and happy. We want the very best for them, so we can feel completely stuck when we hear "I wasn't picked for the school team again", or "I can't do this homework, I'm stupid" and we get especially frustrated when they tell us "I'm not eating that!".

In my workshops and seminars I introduce parents to four themes to help them increase their child's emotional, physical, mental and social resilience. The most important of these is helping children to understand and manage their emotions, so this is where we start.

Enabling your child to recognise their own feelings is one of the greatest gifts you can offer them. Unfortunately, we begin to deprive them of this very early on in their lives. When they say "I'm hungry" and we say "You can't be hungry, you've only just had lunch", or "I hate Alex" and we say "No you don't, Alex is your best friend!" not only are we not listening to our children, we are denying their feelings.

So how do we listen, and more importantly, show that we're listening? One of the most helpful approaches is to look at things using a format that I call the LENS technique:

Listen stop what you're doing, look at

your child and really pay attention **Empathise** nod and make encouraging sounds like "Hmmm" and "uh-huh" but don't say anything yet

Notice and name the feeling. When they have finished, say "It sounds as though you're upset / disappointed / cross / fed up [insert relevant feeling]."

Stop talking

When we're tired, in a hurry, or stressed and frustrated ourselves, it can feel very difficult to do this, but it is so worth it. The day after attending my workshop *A Toolkit for Raising Resilient Children*, I had this wonderful e-mail from Anna, one of the delegates:

"Sammy, my three-year-old son started a pre-bedtime meltdown. To which I just listened. Sammy was screaming. He stopped as soon as he realised I was listening to him and I had 'labelled' how he was feeling – frustration. He then looked puzzled and said 'Mummy, why aren't you talking?' I said: 'Because I

was listening to you. What do you think we should do now?' he said 'Go to bed Mummy'. What a result!"

Anna used the LENS technique to listen to Sammy and show him she was empathising with him – that she really understood what was going on for him in his three-year-old world. And that's often all a child needs: to feel that the grown-up in their life 'gets it' (whether that child is three, 10 or 17).

Often in our hurry to solve the problem, make our children feel better or get them to co-operate, we forget to acknowledge how they are feeling. The sooner they can work out how they are feeling and know that we understand, the quicker they can work out a solution for themselves. You'll be amazed how often they do!

■ Julia Philpott is running an open workshop, *Toolkit for Raising Resilient Children* on Jan 26, 9am-1pm at Leatherhead Theatre, £60 per person. For more information and to book tickets visit jpparentcoaching.co.uk or call on 07967 497779

CHILD'S DILEMMA	What you might typically say	Try LENS instead...	COMMENTS
"I wasn't picked for the school team again." 	"That's just wrong. I'm going to call the games teacher."	Stop what you're doing, look them in the eye, pause (maybe give them a hug) and say "That sucks. I bet you feel really disappointed after all the training you've done."	Sit on any of your own not-being-picked-for-the-school-team gremlins. Remember this is about how your child feels, not you.
"I can't do this homework, I'm stupid!" 	"Of course you're not! Here, show me and let me help."	"Sometimes maths problems can be really tricky and it makes you feel frustrated when you can't get it straight away."	This is often enough to switch them from 'fixed mindset' into 'growth mindset' and get them going again.
"I'm not eating that!" 	"Don't you know there are children starving in Africa!"	"I can see that you really don't feel like eating mince today."	Resist the urge to then say "But I've cooked it so you'll eat it!" In fact, avoid saying 'but' at all.

About Julia Philpott:

Julia is an experienced facilitator, coach, public speaker and parent of two, qualified in executive coaching and psychology. Specialising in children aged 3-12, she delivers parent coaching seminars at a number of Surrey schools including Feltonfleet School, Downsends School, Manor House School and Glenesk School and runs parenting workshops for employees at Sky.