

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LISTEN?

In the picture book *Albert's Impossible Toothache*, by Barbara Williams, Albert, a turtle, complains that he has a toothache. His family points out that turtles have no teeth and so don't have toothaches, and they complain that Albert is not telling the truth. "You never believe me," Albert protests, and he takes to his bed, staying there for days. Finally, his grandmother arrives, and asks Albert, "Where is your toothache?" Albert tells her that it is in his toe, where a gopher bit him.

One of the story's primary themes is that no one really tries to listen to Albert until his grandmother arrives. The family doesn't attempt to understand what he is saying because they think they already know. Only his grandmother seems interested in his point of view; she starts by assuming not that he is lying, but that he is being misunderstood. She is the only one who thinks to ask him what he means when he refers to a toothache, and who then listens to what he has to say.

Educator Nel Noddings calls listening "that supremely important form of receiving."<sup>1</sup> It begins with a desire to understand and a willingness to learn. Too frequently, we hear but do not listen—we recognize the words being said to us, but we don't stop to appreciate what the speaker is trying to tell us. We are too busy planning whatever it is we are going to say next to pay concentrated attention to someone else's words.

Even when we think we are listening, we can do so with a proverbial “half an ear,” sometimes completing the speakers’ thoughts, aloud or in our minds, before they have finished because we are certain we can correctly predict what they will say. We rush in, without making the effort to grasp fully what we’ve heard. As a result, the exchange is necessarily somewhat superficial, as we just skirt the surface of each other’s speech, unwilling to put ourselves fully into the exchange, to engage with what someone says with our whole being, doing our best to understand.

This is especially true of adult exchanges with children. When I ask groups of children if they think that most adults listen to them, they inevitably reply, almost with one voice, “Adults don’t take us seriously because they think we don’t know anything.”

## **LISTENING TO CHILDREN**

From early in life, children repeatedly are told that they need to listen to others, which generally means listening to the adults in their lives. Yet rarely are they given thoughtful guidance about *how* to become skilled listeners, and even more rarely are they given the message that it is important that others listen to them. Children’s listening paradigms are likely to involve a one-sided dynamic—they are supposed to listen to adults.

Moreover, children notice that adults regularly fail to listen to one another. For all the instructional urging children receive about the importance of good listening, it is not valued in the social and cultural landscapes they observe and experience. Rather than examples of genuine listening, children watch people, whether seen on television or online, routinely interrupt, talk over, or ignore each other.

Listening requires commitment. It demands that we attend not just to the words spoken, but also to the ways in which people express their ideas and feelings, which might be quite different

from our own communicative approach. For example, educators Haeny Yoon and Tran Nguyen Templeton observe that very young children's views of the world have a tendency to be enacted in a nonlinear way, as narrative fragments. They express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings by telling stories, moving between what they recall actually happened in a situation and what they wish had happened.<sup>2</sup>

For example, a young child who experiences a conflict with another child at school might describe the event in a story that includes the other child being taken away by a monster. Listening carefully helps the adult recognize the feelings the child is relating. Because adults don't often pay close attention to what young children say, we miss the stories they are telling us. Yoon and Templeton comment, "Hundreds of children's narrative fragments go unheard by adults"; they further note, though, that these stories "are fed and nurtured by children within their peer cultures."<sup>3</sup> Children listen to each other in ways that can be invisible to adults.

The work of Vivian Gussin Paley illustrates this well. For example, she recounts what happens when, in her kindergarten class one day, a student, Derek, is sitting in the time-out chair. Another child, Georgina, has been watching him, and eventually she sidles over to him, handing him a drawing she tells him that she drew for him. When he looks away, she responds with, "Meow-meow?" Paley writes:

The effect is instantaneous, as if a sunbeam has suddenly bounced off the wall. Derek swivels around to face the little girl. "Woof-woof," he barks softly. "I'm Superdog, okay?"

Georgina, Paley states, knows that "Superdogs do not belong on time-out chairs."<sup>4</sup> Georgina has been listening to Derek. She is aware that he has been developing the story of who he is and who

he wants to be through his Superdog play, and she supports his efforts to start to create his own identity and sense of self.

## CURIOSITY

Listening entails curiosity. When we are curious about other people—about who they are and what they think—we do our best to listen. We are receptive to the possibility that what we hear will change us, that we might learn something that will lead to seeing the world in new and surprising ways. Rather than being limited by our expectations about what someone is going to say, we focus on what the person is actually saying and are open to learning from them. Paley writes about learning to listen to very young children:

[T]he decisive factor for me was curiosity. When my intention was limited to announcing my own point of view, communication came to a halt. My voice drowned out the children's. However, when they said things that surprised me, exposing ideas I did not imagine they held, my excitement mounted and I could feel myself transcribing their words even as they spoke. I kept the children talking, savoring the uniqueness of responses so singularly different from mine. The rules of teaching had changed; I now wanted to hear the answers I could not myself invent.<sup>5</sup>

Paley acknowledges that she, like many adults, tends to enter into conversations with children with the sole purpose of “announcing [her] own point of view,” and that when she checks this inclination, she has the privilege of discovering responses to the world that emerge from “the child’s point of view” and are quite distinct from her own.<sup>6</sup>

Templeton candidly describes the difficulties she faced working with a group of preschool-age children. As part of a research

project, she gave the children digital cameras and asked them to take photos, explaining to them that she hoped, through their photographs, to learn more about what it is like to be a child. She requested that all the children choose five favorite photos to share with their classmates. Templeton relates how her prejudgments about four-year-old Saryu, whom she sees as particularly creative, led her to ignore how the young girl wanted to express her story.

The scholar had already constructed the narrative she believed Surya should tell, based on what Templeton thought was interesting and which photos she judged as the most accomplished. She realizes later that she completely missed what Surya was communicating. What Templeton initially deemed “seemingly mundane photos Surya chose of the lights in her house, the coloring book, and sidewalk” in actuality illuminate “significant family and cultural practices” that constitute “facets of [Surya’s] complex identities.”<sup>7</sup>

Because Templeton reduced Surya to a single and simple identity—a young child—rather than appreciating her as a multidimensional individual, she failed to understand the complex story Surya attempted to express. As Templeton notes, adult tendencies and values can limit our abilities to engage openly with young children. We hear them through the lens of what we believe they can or should be saying. We are quick to finish their sentences and often barely register their comments.

As a result, as Templeton observes, “children must manage adults’ expectations and their own social desires at once.”<sup>8</sup> Children learn, in other words, to try to say things in ways adults want to hear, which can distort what children really want to communicate. The power imbalance makes it challenging for adults to listen to children in genuine ways, without prejudgment, and for children to speak freely with an expectation that adults are really open to listening to them.

Adult-centered expectations can dampen children's voices even when adults intend to listen. Sometimes, for instance, we try to help children convey their thinking more clearly or fully by suggesting a different way to say something. "Did you mean to say . . . ?" Although this approach can sometimes be a useful way to help a child to communicate a thought with greater clarity, we have to be careful that we are not just completing the child's thought ourselves. Without planning to do so, adults can put words in children's mouths, thinking that we already understand what they are saying and that they just need our assistance to articulate their thoughts more precisely. Although generally well-meaning, this practice risks distorting or silencing what the child has to say.

Children frequently are provided with help that they don't actually need. For educator Maria Montessori, providing children with "unnecessary help" fails to respect their efforts by treating them like "puppets [or] dolls."<sup>9</sup> We want to make sure we are giving children (as well as other adults) the space they need to think through and express their thoughts without superfluous interference. There is a fine line between responding in ways that help others tease out their own ideas and altering what they mean to express.

Moreover, when we mistakenly interpret or rephrase what we think children mean to say, they can hesitate to tell us we're incorrect. In these situations, children may naturally assume that adults know more and therefore instinctively agree, even though the rephrased comment actually misrepresents the child's thinking. Because adults have more power than children do, it is important to ensure that the child has sufficient opportunity to respond candidly. Moreover, children spend a great deal of time observing and imitating adults. If they absorb the message that it is less important that adults listen to them than that they listen to

adults, as they become adults, they are likely to treat children the same way.

Socrates is regularly cited as a model listener, because, it is noted, he listens in order to learn; that is, he genuinely attends to the words of others in order to grasp their meaning and then reasons to try to understand what he has heard.<sup>10</sup> Always willing to reconsider his own views, he freely admits that he believes he knows nothing. However, it has also been pointed out that Socrates's form of listening, with its "more aggressive demand for clarification and justification," has the potential to "awaken defensiveness by its exacting, logical rigor."<sup>11</sup> In other words, there is a distinction between Socrates's method of engaging in discussions, which involves insistent probing of people's speech in order to induce them to think more carefully about their own positions, and listening that attempts to take in another's speech as generously as possible.

This is an especially meaningful distinction when adults talk with children. Because adults primarily play the roles of authorities, teachers, and advisors in children's lives, we can be easily tempted to slip into the habit of focusing all our conversations with children on what they can learn. We concentrate on helping them to think or express themselves in ways that we think are more mature or skillful. This is valuable, of course, but it can also detract from our ability to listen to them.

It may be true that the kind of approach that Socrates used with his companions does help children think more critically. However, its demanding rigor can also have an inhibiting effect on children, thereby limiting our ability to learn about the way children see the world or come to appreciate their "point of view," as Paley puts it. Although we certainly want to help children develop their independent thinking skills, we also want to be careful to refrain from eclipsing with instruction their attempts to articulate their experiences and beliefs.

I have struggled with this in classrooms. Part of my role as an educator is to help children learn to articulate and examine their questions and beliefs more lucidly. Additionally, though, I am responsible for helping to create an environment that nurtures understanding and trust and values each child's voice. I consciously approach my classroom conversations by working to develop spaces for the children to explore the questions that matter to them without imposing my own views about which questions are significant or interesting.

Nevertheless, at times, after a child has spoken I have jumped in too quickly with a clarifying question or description of what I thought the child meant, only to realize retrospectively that I had let my own ideas or interests get in the way of what the child actually wanted to say. Sometimes this has resulted in the child deciding to end the exchange. If I really want to understand that child's point of view, that point of view has to take priority. Listening and asking questions from a place of curiosity and respect, and letting go of one's own agenda, can cultivate a space in which children can think their own thoughts and express their own ideas in their own ways.

When we are honestly curious about what and how children think, and we relinquish our need to control our conversations with them, we can be present to them in a fuller way, allowing their words to reach us without the filter of our expectations and judgments. This is challenging and all the more valuable when operating within the hierarchy of teacher and student, parent and child, or simply adult and youth. If we are mindful of the power we have as adults in encounters with children and committed to listening as openly as we can to what they have to say, we can make room for more honest and reciprocal exchanges.

I have learned to be wary of hastily assuming that I have grasped what a child (or any speaker) really means. As Gareth Matthews observes, "[Children's] comments and questions have a



freshness and inventiveness that it is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match."<sup>12</sup> Listening to them can challenge our assumptions and change our expectations for what children are like, and what roles they might play in our families, communities, and society. To do so, we have to be open to being affected and perhaps transformed by what they have to say.<sup>13</sup> Genuine listening requires both openheartedness and receptivity.

## OPENHEARTEDNESS AND RECEPTIVITY

We are openhearted when we try to comprehend what a person says with as few assumptions, as little prejudice, and as much empathy as possible; and when we absorb another's speech with generosity, viewing it in the best possible light. That means holding in abeyance, as much as we can, our view of the other person (and thus our expectation for what we think the speaker means to say) and our judgments about the value of the speech. Philosopher Michel Foucault advises, "When you have heard someone say something important, do not start quibbling straightaway but try to collect yourself and spend some moments in silence, the better to imprint what you have heard."<sup>14</sup> Taking seriously what someone says means taking the time to comprehend as best we can what they are telling us.

Philosopher Joseph Beatty contends that good listeners exhibit "a kind of detachment." As listeners we draw on who we are, but at the same time we attempt to transcend our own limitations: "the good listener keeps herself focused on the particular other's meaning, *no matter what* the good listener thinks, judges, feels."<sup>15</sup> We accept that listening well means that our own judgments are less important than the meaning of what the other person is saying and that we have to hold those judgments back in order to understand the speaker. For example, if we are listening to someone and we think, "That doesn't seem right," we might then say to

ourselves, “Perhaps I am not yet understanding what is being said,” or “Perhaps I will end up reevaluating how I think about this.”<sup>16</sup>

In my work with children, I have observed them be models of openhearted listening. They tend to be curious about what other people think and are less inclined to assume that they already understand what someone else means to say, or that they already know what someone *should* think. In general, they are far less certain than are adults about the correctness of their beliefs. Of course, very young children are learning how to listen and refrain from interrupting, and they can struggle with their desires to share their own thoughts in lieu of listening to others. They are still developing the skills to be able to follow the thread of discussion and connect their own contributions to what others have already said. At the same time, they are openly interested in what their peers have to say and are capable of waiting patiently while other children take the time they need to express a thought or question. In almost every elementary school I visit, in every grade, there are moments where students wait quietly while a classmate works to find the right words.

Openhearted listening does not mean accepting whatever is said without scrutiny. Listening necessitates both “generous interpretation and thoughtful response”<sup>17</sup>—a response that takes seriously what is said and indicates a willingness to genuinely engage with the ideas, questions, or feelings being expressed. We can think we are supporting children by quickly affirming everything they say, without thinking too much about what they’ve actually said, but this approach fails to acknowledge the child’s speech as worthy of thoughtful consideration.

Educator Sophie Hartounian-Gordon argues that listening always involves questioning in order to understand what is being said to us.<sup>15</sup> When we ask for clarification, reasons, or further explanation, we demonstrate the importance of understanding

the speaker's words. Asking open-ended, nonleading questions helps both listener and speaker develop a better awareness of what is being communicated, and has the potential to deepen the speaker's self-understanding as well as the listener's grasp of what the speaker is conveying.

Erich Fromm suggests that the "basic rule for practicing [the art of listening] is the complete concentration of the listener."<sup>19</sup> This entails focusing on the speaker, ensuring that one's attention wanders as little as possible to one's own ideas, and taking the time necessary to let someone's thoughts unfold without jumping in to interrogate or impose one's own point of view. Receptivity demands both attentiveness and a willingness to consider unfamiliar points of view. For philosopher Martin Buber, listening encourages "the other to create his or her own meanings, which may be very different from one's own." To fully take in another's perspective, we have to recognize that there are multiple ways of seeing the world.