

DEEPEN YOUR CONNECTION AND
STRENGTHEN THEIR CONFIDENCE

HOW TO

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WILL



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BECKY HARLING

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BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

© 2021 by Becky Harling

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harling, Becky, author.

Title: How to listen so your kids will talk : deepen your connection and strengthen their confidence / Becky Harling.

Description: Minneapolis : Bethany House Publishers, [2021]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020035865 | ISBN 9780764237218 (trade paperback) |

ISBN 9780764238574 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493429844 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Listening. | Interpersonal communication in children. | Confidence in children. | Parent and child.

Classification: LCC BF323.L5 H367 2021 | DDC 649/.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020035865>

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Cover design by Dan Pitts

Author represented by The Blythe Daniel Agency, Inc.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*This book is lovingly dedicated to our daughter,
Stefanie Holder.*

*Ah, Stef, you have been such a gift to me.
God taught me so much through you
And what a joy it has been to watch you grow to
Become the strong and godly woman you are.
Indeed, you have the spirit of Deborah.
I pray that God continues to increase
your influence and your wisdom.
You have definitely been set apart for Him
Since you were little.
I love you, Stef, and am so proud of you!*

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GIVE THEM A VOICE

Having a parent who listens creates a child who believes he or she has a voice that matters in this world.

—Rachel Macy Stafford

Parenting is a perilous journey. I’ve joked about writing a parenting book called *Blackmail, Bribery, and a Whole Lot of Prayer*. That’s basically how Steve and I raised our four kids. We loved being parents—we just didn’t know what we were doing. Sometimes our strategies worked out well, and sometimes they were a complete bust! It is only by the grace of God that our kids turned out so amazing and that they still like us.

One memory stands out clearly in my mind. It had been an awful week with Stefanie, who was only four at the time, and I hadn’t handled things well at all. A sobbing mess, I knelt before the Lord. “God, I can’t do this! I’m screwing her up. I’m sure she’ll need a lifetime of therapy after I’m done!”

My pint-size girl with big blue eyes had opinions . . . lots of them! In fact, when Stefanie was three years old, the pediatrician told me, “Becky, she’s tiny but mighty.” No kidding. It felt

as though every conversation with my petite beauty turned into an argument. If I wanted her to wear a pink outfit, she wanted a purple one. If I asked her to pick up her clothes, she had a better idea. In fact, she was loaded with brilliant ideas. Many conversations began with “Mommy, don’t say no yet . . .” and then Stefanie would launch into a full-fledged debate. If I didn’t agree, she thought she just hadn’t tried the right argument, and the negotiating would begin all over again. I thought I would lose my ever-loving mind!

On that fateful morning when I had a complete meltdown, I poured out my heart in prayer. Between my sniffles and sobs, I heard the Lord speak very clearly: “Give her a voice!”

That was not the answer I expected, and part of me wanted to scream, “Are you kidding me?! Trust me, Lord, she already has a voice.” A million questions raced through my mind. Shouldn’t I quiet her voice, teach her respect, and insist she obey? What about all the books that teach parents to break their will? But as I continued in prayer, I heard the Holy Spirit say, “Don’t break her will—shape it.” And again: “Give her a voice!”

As I mulled over the somewhat strange message from the Lord, He began to impress on me that He—the Holy One—had designed and created my daughter with opinions and a strong need to speak up. My job as a parent was not to silence her voice but to develop it so that Stefanie would become a strong adult, unwilling to yield to cultural pressure that would be contrary to her faith.

Gradually, I began to change my strategy. When Stef was a preschooler, I would set the kitchen timer. She would get one minute per year of her age to state her case. I remained silent for four minutes while she presented her case with the understanding that after she argued, I would have the final say. My little negotiator would think through her finest arguments before presenting them. Shockingly, I slowly began to see that

her arguments were quite brilliant. Sometimes I said no, but often I said yes.

I began to see that God had wired and gifted Stef to have a strong voice for His glory. She was quite the leader! She had the ability, even as a tiny child, to see a problem and go after it with a solution. Sometimes her solutions drove me bonkers, but often they had value.

Stef had what I call the spirit of Deborah. Deborah was a judge whom God raised up to help defeat the enemies of Israel (Judges 4:4–7). Deborah was a strong leader, confident and mighty in faith. She didn't yield to peer pressure but stayed firmly focused on what God called her to do. That was the type of daughter I wanted to raise, but that meant I was going to have to change some of my strategies. I needed to learn to cultivate Stef's voice rather than silence it. I needed to listen to really understand her heart and help her feel loved. And I needed to cheer her on when she raised her voice. Even when she pushed back on what I wanted her to do.

That little interaction with the Lord ultimately changed my entire parenting strategy. Rather than simply striving for order and control, I became more focused on listening to understand. Instead of simply running a taxi service to cart kids to school, sports practices, and music lessons, I began to pray that our car time would be great conversation time. I learned to use car time to encourage them to express themselves. When they were teens, I discovered that they actually talked a lot more in the car because we weren't looking at each other and they couldn't read my face.

I asked God for wisdom every day for how to draw out each of our four kids. Now, to be honest, our kids were naturally pretty verbal. (That's an understatement!) But I don't think that's why they opened up. It's not about how verbal they are; it's how safe they feel with you that determines how honest they are with you about what's going on in their hearts. In order

to draw out what's really in their hearts, you'll want to really hone your listening skills, even if you already consider yourself a good listener.

How safe they feel with you determines how honest they are with you about what's going on in their hearts.

I'll be the first to say, I *didn't* always listen well. In fact, in *How to Listen So People Will Talk*, I wrote about a time in my parenting journey when my oldest daughter, Bethany, confronted me because I wasn't listening well. Though I still had a lot to learn about listening, I did feel encouraged that Bethany felt comfortable enough as an older teen to be honest with me. At the time I would have preferred much different feedback, but that conversation started me on a quest to become a better listener.

Enough about My Kids—Do *Your* Kids Feel Heard?

I'm guessing that in your parenting journey you might be wrestling with similar issues. Maybe you have a negotiator who always puts up an argument. You're sick and tired of arguing and long for her to acquiesce. Or maybe you have a child who holds feelings close to his heart and goes silent on you. You're wrestling with how to get that child to open up and struggling to figure out what's going on in his head. Maybe you've got a teen who has completely walled himself off, and you feel like you're desperate to connect.

Let me ask you a question. What would happen if you asked your child if he felt heard? Would he look at you like you're from another planet? Would he give you a sarcastic response? Or would he feel valued and loved? Would he give you feedback like my daughter did that would help you in your relationship with each other?

Author David Augsburger writes, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost

indistinguishable.”¹ That means there’s a lot at stake as far as your kids are concerned—if they don’t feel heard, they may not know how much you truly love them.

Take a minute and imagine the type of relationship you want with your kids when they’re grown. What are you hoping for? What dreams do you have as far as closeness for your relationship? Then consider these questions: How do you want to show up as a parent? How would you like to be remembered after they’re grown? The answers to those questions will determine how serious you are about moving forward in your goals of connecting with your child now and grown adult then.

If you want kids who will share their hearts and enjoy being with you when they’re adults, you need to begin intently listening *now*.

Here’s what I know: If you want kids who will share their hearts with you and enjoy being with you when they’re adults, you need to begin intently listening **now**. The practices you put into place **now** will influence the nature of your relationship **then**.

Where do we find the best practices for listening to our kids? God’s Word. It turns out He has a lot to say about how we listen.

What Does God Have to Do with Listening?

In our parenting journey Steve and I had two goals: We wanted our kids to grow up to love Jesus (which, by the way, we couldn’t control; we could only model). We also wanted a strong and healthy relationship with each child when they became adults (which involved choices on our part that we could control).

To find the wisdom we needed, Steve and I turned to the Bible. In Proverbs we discovered what became our key verse as we raised our kids. Solomon, the author of Proverbs, has been

called the wisest man who ever lived. He penned these words: “By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures” (Proverbs 24:3–4).

Tucked within this poetic verse are three crucial concepts that became the bedrock for how we would raise our kids and give them a voice:

BY WISDOM A HOUSE IS BUILT. If we were going to build the type of family that we were envisioning, we would need lots of wisdom. We knew the source of wisdom was God himself, and that meant we needed to spend time listening to Him. He is the one who said, “Listen, my people, and I will speak” (Psalm 50:7). While there were many experts out there speaking on raising kids, we knew we needed to go to God first and foremost for wisdom.

THROUGH UNDERSTANDING IT IS ESTABLISHED. The idea behind this couplet speaks to re-establishing something that’s been toppled over. In our home of four active kids, it was not uncommon to have soccer balls flying through the rooms and lamps getting knocked over. Just as I often had to re-establish a lamp that had been toppled over, I often had to re-establish feelings that were toppled over: angry feelings about a teacher who was unfair; hurt feelings from a friend who betrayed; discouraged feelings from not making a tryout. There was no shortage of toppled feelings.

If we were going to build strong bonds with our kids, we would need to seek to understand. We needed to offer empathy and help our kids feel that their feelings made sense and that we heard what they were saying and noticed their emotions.

It’s easy as parents to listen in order to correct or instruct. We needed to shift our focus to listening to understand. The wise writer of Proverbs wrote that we are to tune our ears

to wisdom and our hearts to understanding (Proverbs 2:2). By focusing on understanding, Steve and I would better be able to re-establish our children when the world knocked them over.

THROUGH KNOWLEDGE ITS ROOMS ARE FILLED WITH RARE AND BEAUTIFUL TREASURES. In order to guide each of our children according to the way God designed them to go, we needed to study their uniquenesses (Proverbs 22:6). If we were going to enjoy the treasure of having a close relationship, we would have to study their personalities in order to figure out when and where they would most likely talk. Each of our four kids was designed uniquely, and each had different habits and patterns of communicating. While they were all quite verbal, not all of them shared their hearts so easily. As parents we needed to put effort into discovering who would share his or her heart best over an after-school snack and who would talk freely while on the way to an event. Becoming a student of each child's personality became critical.

In your parenting journey, these three keys are going to guide how you listen so that your kids will talk: Seek God for wisdom, listen with the goal of understanding, and become a student of your child so that your knowledge of her unique personality grows.

Here's What I Know about You

I'm impressed that you picked up this book in the first place. The fact that you did shows me that you are an intentional parent. You want a good relationship with your child, and you're willing to put effort into developing listening strategies that will help you parent more effectively. You are like the parent mentioned in Proverbs 14:1 who is wise and desires to build her home and not have any foolishness assault it.

Here's another thing I know about you: Just like me, you get frustrated and mess up in the parenting realm from time to time. Don't beat yourself up. None of us are perfect parents. There are going to be days when chaos breaks loose in your home, and you're going to have a meltdown worrying that you've irrevocably screwed up your child for life. Breathe. Apologize. Understand that we've all had those moments. They're not usually advertised on Facebook, but if your friends are authentic, they'll admit they've had days when they've failed miserably and wanted to call it quits. Use the moments when you blow it to propel you toward doing things differently the next time. And by the way—God was the perfect parent, and His kids sure messed up in the Garden. So just to be perfectly clear, this book does not guarantee that your kids will grow up to love Jesus like you want them to. That isn't something we can control as parents. What this book does promise is that if you put the work into listening to understand your kids, your relationship with them will improve. Often when the relationship improves, you have a much better shot at your kids' respecting you, adopting your faith, and living their lives so you have a relationship with them in the years ahead.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Throughout the rest of this book we're going to look at some key principles that, if put into practice, will improve how you listen to your kids and therefore increase their feelings of being heard. I'm going to challenge you to

- learn what your nonverbals are saying to your children,
- turn it off and tune in,
- help them find their feelings,

- listen to affirm their strengths,
- ask great questions—but don't interrogate,
- listen to empower good decision-making skills,
- negotiate with grace,
- contain yourself in conflict, and
- teach them to have conversations with God.

If you put each of these principles into practice, I can guarantee two things:

1. It won't always be comfortable. It's going to take work and humility on your part to admit that you might need to grow in the listening department.
2. Your relationship with your children will be strengthened, because at the core of our human nature we want to feel heard.

I also want you to know that I am still growing as a listener and still putting these principles into practice, even though now our kids are grown, are married, and have kids of their own.

The other night a few of our adult kids were over. As we sat in the family room, Steve posed a question: "What do you wish we had done differently?" As each of the adult kids spoke, I praised God that I was able to receive all that they shared. We didn't do everything perfectly, but along the way we were able to apologize for the things we wished we had done differently and move toward having healthier relationships. What was amazing about our discussion was that most of our kids felt heard. For that I am thankful. As I continue to grow in my journey to listen to my adult kids and my grandkids, I wonder: Will you join me? The benefits are amazing!

Are You Ready?

Here are a few things you need to know. Each chapter will include principles from Scripture and stories from my family and others. At the end of each chapter, there will be a section called “Wisdom Tools.”

In this section you’ll find three categories:

- **Wisdom from God.** This section will include a short portion of Scripture for you to focus on as well as a sample prayer you can pray.
- **Wisdom for self-care.** Here’s what I know: Parents who are tired and overcommitted are more likely to lose it with their kids. This section is going to include some reflective questions to help you understand the condition of your overall health as a parent. It will also include suggestions for monitoring your attitude and for practicing self-care.
- **Wisdom for the ages.** This section will give a wisdom tip for parenting kids of various ages that correlates with the content of the chapter.

Before we start, why don’t you take a moment and pray this prayer? LORD, I thank you that you are the perfect parent and that you always bend down to listen to my heart. God, you know that I often mess up when listening to my children. Sometimes I have absolutely no idea what to do or where to turn. Remind me as I go through this day to turn to you first. You are the perfect expert on my children, and you know exactly what they need. I pray that you will fill me with your Spirit of wisdom today as I parent.

Here’s your first set of wisdom tools.

WISDOM TOOLS

Wisdom from God: Proverbs 24:3-4

Spend a few quiet minutes reflecting on the three key principles that will guide your listening journey: seeking God for wisdom, listening to understand and re-establish, and becoming a student of your child. After you've spent a few moments thinking about those three guiding principles, think of one action item for each principle. For example:

- **Seek God for wisdom:** I will start each day in prayer for each child, asking God for wisdom.
- **Listen to understand:** I will not correct feelings. I will affirm the feeling my child is having and only correct behavior.
- **Become a student of your child:** I will take _____ (put in the name of your child) on a date and ask specific questions to simply know her better.

Wisdom for Self-Care

1. How many hours of sleep do you get each night?
2. When deadlines pile up at work, how do you most often handle the pressure?
3. When was the last time you took time for you—perhaps a quiet walk, a haircut and color, or a sporting activity that you enjoy?
4. Which child are you most worried about right now? What can you control, and what can you not control?

Wisdom for the Ages

PRESCHOOLERS. Spend some time today asking your preschooler to tell you a story. Understand that in the preschool years a child's imagination is developing. For example, after hearing Steve talk about growing up in Africa, our four-year-old grandson told Steve an elaborate story about how he had gone on a hike and had to fight off a lion and a bear. Rather than correcting with truth, we listened to Noah's tale. Today allow your preschooler to tell you a story. Even if it's elaborate, don't correct. Just let her imagine.

GRADE SCHOOLERS. Ask your grade schooler, "If you and I could spend the day together doing anything you like, what would we do?"

TWEENS. Ask your ten-to-twelve-year-old how well you listen. Give him permission to be honest. Ask him where he wishes you would improve your listening. (Don't argue or defend. Simply listen and thank him for sharing his opinions.)

TEENS. Explain to your teen that you are working on your communication skills and that you would like him to evaluate your listening skills. Ask him for three specific ways you could improve. Don't push back on anything he says. Instead, thank him for helping you.

God Is Cheering You On!

As you begin this journey to become a better listener to your child, you might feel overwhelmed or inadequate. But God decided long before the foundation of the earth that you were the right parent for your child. So when you feel discouraged in the journey, remember, God is cheering for you! I think if He were to write you an encouraging note, it might go something like this:

My dear child,

I know you feel overwhelmed in your parenting journey and that you long to be the perfect parent to your children. I understand. I was the perfect parent, and my kids sure screwed up in the Garden (Genesis 3). As a result, I make every effort to re-establish our deep connection. I, like you, have cried over the behavior of my kids. I, like you, long for closer connection and fellowship with my children. As you parent, know that I am for you and not against you. I am praying for you and for your children (John 17) as you try to parent gently and compassionately. When you feel angry, come to me and ask for my love. When you feel frustrated and overwhelmed, come and ask for my wisdom. When you feel inadequate, ask for my grace. When you feel you've blown it completely, ask for my mercy and forgiveness. If you press into me, I will give you the wisdom you ask for (James 1:5) and the perseverance you need (James 1:4). I have given my word—trust me. I have big plans for your children (Jeremiah 29:11), so don't be afraid to give them a voice. I plan to use them in my kingdom for my glory. As you cooperate with my Spirit, I will empower you to be the parent I've called you to be. Trust me, I love your children even more than you do, and as I cheer you on, I am also cheering them on.

*Your Always Loving
Father*