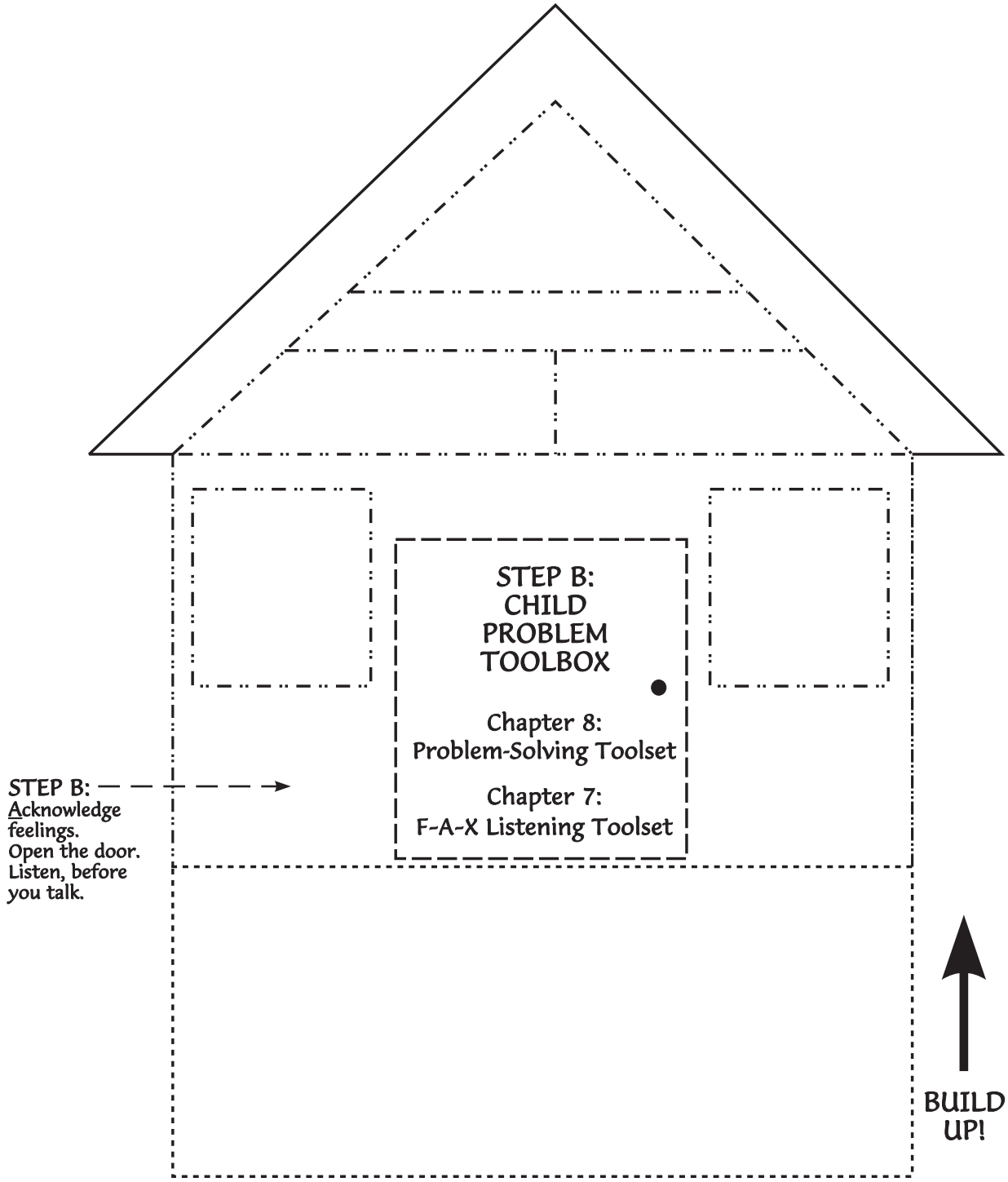
STEP B
CHILD PROBLEM TOOLBOX



STEP B CHILD PROBLEM TOOLBOX

Secure houses protect us from nature's storms and other outside threats by controlling who enters our house. Likewise, people build emotional walls and doors that protect them from emotional storms and outside threats by controlling who enters their private world of feelings. The Child Problem Toolbox is represented by a door, because it contains the tools that help others feel trusting enough to open their emotional doors, share their thoughts and feelings, and weather the stormy problems that can happen in life.

IN THIS SECTION

Step B of the Universal Blueprint is the Child Problem Toolbox. In it, we begin learning about "F-A-X Communication." One part of F-A-X Communication is *sending* messages to others, which we learn in Chapter 10, "The Clear Communication Toolset." In this section, we learn the other part of F-A-X Communication, *receiving* messages. The Child Problem Toolbox contains two toolsets that help us respond effectively to Child problems or the child's feelings and perspective of Parent problems.

- ***Chapter 7, "The F-A-X Listening Toolset,"*** teaches us the first step of F-A-X Listening, "**F**ocus on feelings." These tools let others know it is safe to open their emotional doors to their private world of feelings. When people feel understood, they work through feelings and problems quicker.
- ***Chapter 8, "The Problem-Solving Toolset,"*** teaches us the last two steps in F-A-X communication, "**A**sk helpful questions" and "**X**-amine possible solutions." These are the real "power" tools in *The Parent's Toolshop*, because they em-power people to resolve their *own* problems.

Many of the explanations in the Child Problem Toolbox are presented in general terms, referring to *people*, not just children, because these tools are useful in *any* human relationship. Wherever you see the word *child* you can replace it with *the other person*.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOLBOX

We can use the Child Problem Toolbox when others want to do any of the following:
- Tell a story, express strong feelings (positive or negative), or share a problem.
- Have others understand their thoughts, feelings, or opinions.
- Clarify or resolve a problem.

As we learned in the Universal Blueprint chapter, the first step in resolving problems is to identify what type of problem we are facing:

- If children have a problem (C) *children* are responsible for solving it.
- If parents have a problem (P, PU, PO), *parents* are responsible for starting the problem-solving process by bringing the problem to the attention of those involved.
- If there is a problem that bothers or affects *both* parents and children, *each* has a shared responsibility for finding the solution.

We can use the Child Problem Toolbox as part of our response to *any* type of problem.

No Problems (NO)

The *Self-Esteem Toolset* taught us to listen to children's feelings and opinions, so they know they are important.

The *Cooperation Toolset* taught us to acknowledge feelings when setting limits with positive words.

The *Independence Toolset* taught us to use listening and problem solving when children want information or help. This helps us avoid taking over *their* problems.

Parent Problems (P, PU, PO)

When Parent problems occur we "come into the house" to respond (Step C: Parent Problem Toolbox). It is *vital* that we take Step B, **A**cknowledging the other person's feelings or perspective, *before or while* we take Step C, **S**etting limits, expressing our concerns and redirecting misbehavior. If we only focus on our issues, other people usually feel defensive and stop listening or are distracted because they are waiting for their chance to talk. Either way, we lose our audience. When *we* have a problem (Parent problems), we briefly bring up the issue and quickly shift to our listening skills, allowing others to express their feelings. We can also acknowledge feelings *while* we are redirecting misbehavior. When we include Step B, **A**cknowledging feelings, others can work through their emotions, which is the real issue beneath their behavior.

We need to make a clear distinction, at this point, that allowing negative feelings and opinions is different from allowing hurtful actions. *Feelings are okay, they are there and they are real.* If hurtful actions are involved, that part of the problem is a Parent problem (SHARP RV). Listening is the first step (Step B), which could only involve a half-of-a-sentence, followed by steps C1 and C2, which set limits and redirect the misbehavior. Once parents and children understand the problem, the parents can come back to the Problem-Solving Toolset to get agreements for future behavior.

> **Effective communication is the key to resolving problems and F-A-X Listening is *the* most important communication tool.**

Child Problems

Let's quickly review what Child problems are and how to diagnose them. Then, we will learn the specific tools for resolving them.

When a problem arises, we stop to consider the Child (PESS) and Parent (SHARP RV) issues.

- **If the problem *only* involves any PESS issues (Peers, Emotions, Siblings, School),** the problem is a 100% Child problem. We *only* use the Prevention and Child Problem Toolboxes.
- **If there is more than one problem *and* it involves any SHARP RV issue, (Safety, Health, Appropriateness, Rights, Property, Rules, Values)**, we also ask ourselves, **"Is *any* part of this situation a problem for the child (other person)?"**
    - If the answer is "no," we *briefly* use the Child Problem Toolbox, maybe only a half sentence, to **A**cknowledge children's feelings or perspective, as we bring the problem to their attention.
    - If the answer is "yes," this is a C/P combination problem. We *alternate* between the Child and Parent Problem Toolboxes, depending on which part of the problem we are addressing.

In this section, Step B, the Child Problem Toolbox, we are *only* going to focus on resolving Child problems. Once we know how to use these tools to their full potential, we can also use them to help resolve Parent problems.

TAKING OVER CHILD PROBLEMS

Imagine a problem being like a ball. When people show us a ball (a problem), they are not saying, "take this ball." They are really saying, "Look at this ball I have." When adults see a child's ball (problem), many take it away and say, "I know this ball! I had this ball once! What I did is . . ." This is taking the ball and running with it. We need to "keep the ball in their court." Notice the ball and find out how the child feels about having it. "Look at that ball! Is it heavy? I see some spikes there, does it hurt to hold it? What do you plan to do with that ball?" If we always take a child's ball (problem), the child will stop showing it to us. Instead, we want children to learn how to handle different kinds of balls (problems) on their own.

The difference between being responsible *for* others and being responsible *to* them:

Taking responsibility *for* others involves fixing, protecting, rescuing, controlling, and taking on their problems, feelings, and responsibilities.

Being responsible *to* others **involves listening, showing empathy, offering encouragement, and guiding others, side-by-side (not dragging them), through the problem-solving process.**

Parents are often confused about the difference between being responsible *for* others and being responsible *to* them.[1] When we take responsibility *for* our children's problems, we offer solutions, give answers, and worry about whether our children will "do the right thing." This approach suggests children are not capable of making good decisions for themselves. Many parents think adults have better ideas than children—and if we deny them opportunities to grow and develop problem-solving skills, these beliefs become self-fulfilling prophecies. If we, instead, support and guide people as they figure out solutions to their own problems, their creativity and independence blossom. This is being responsible *to* others.

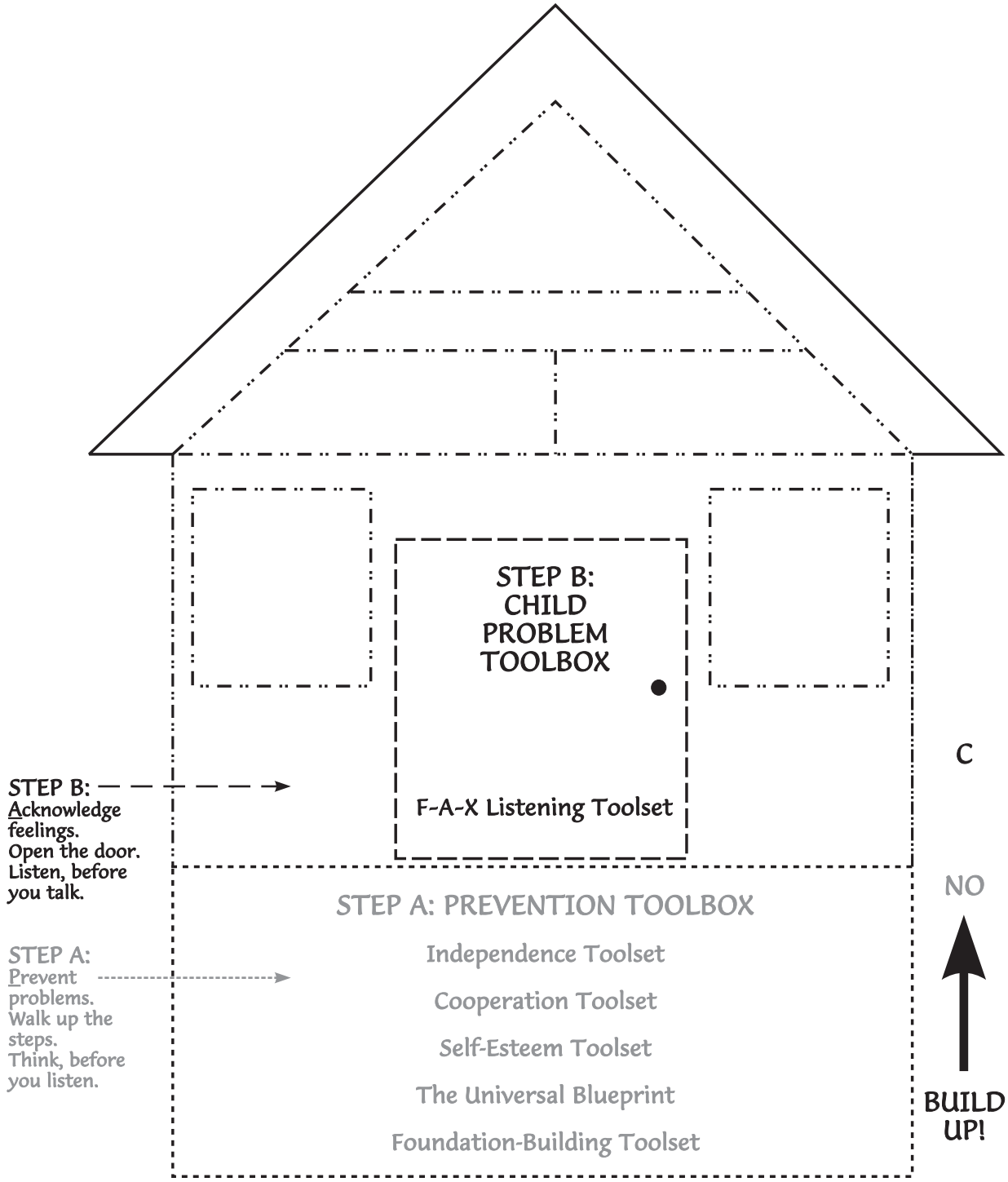
When other people have a problem or are experiencing strong emotions, we can do one or more of the following:

1. ***Let them figure out the solution on their own*** by showing respect for their struggle and giving encouragement.
2. ***Use the F-A-X Listening Toolset*** to help them work through their emotions, but leave the final decision up to them.
3. ***Use the Problem-Solving Toolset*** to help them explore alternatives and plan a solution to the problem.

REFERENCES

1 *Listening for Heaven's Sake*, by Dr. Gary Sweeten, Dave Ping, and Anne Clippard, (Teleios Publications, 1993).

CHAPTER 7
F-A-X LISTENING TOOLSET



CHAPTER 7 F-A-X LISTENING TOOLSET

If the door to our house looks like a six-inch-thick steel bank vault, just its appearance will deter most people from coming in. Even those who might be welcome will get the message that ***no one*** *is welcome. The ideal door is one that opens when we choose, but is sturdy enough to protect us when necessary. If we want to enter another person's house, we don't barge into their house. If we did, they'd feel unsafe and lock their doors. Instead, we knock on their door and let them know we are safe people to let in their house.*

Similarly, if we feel threatened or have been hurt in the past, our emotional doors and walls are thicker and we are less likely to open them. If we want others to open their emotional doors to us, we don't barge in by probing or telling them what they are feeling or what to do. This would only cause them to get defensive and build thicker walls. We ask permission to come in and show them it is safe to share their feelings and thoughts with us. When they open their emotional doors to us, even by a crack, we treat them respectfully. We do this even when ***we*** *need to discuss a problem, so we can continue communicating.*

IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter explains the first step in F-A-X Listening, "Focus on feelings," and teaches us four important tasks:

- Encourage others to share their feelings without accidentally shutting down communication lines.
- Understand the different problem-solving styles.
- Identify the *real* issues or feelings others are facing.
- Help others work through troubling or confusing feelings without taking over.

WHEN TO USE THIS TOOLSET

Use the listening tools when others are experiencing feelings, positive or negative. If *we* have a problem, we acknowledge others' feelings or perspectives *before* we share ours. When children misbehave, these tools help us recognize and resolve the underlying feelings that are *causing* the behavior. In their book, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen, And Listen So Kids Will Talk,* authors Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish say, "There is a direct connection between how kids feel and how they behave. When kids feel right, they'll behave right. How do we help them feel right? By accepting their feelings." In *Siblings Without Rivalry* they add, "The very emotions we want to close the door on and lock out, need to be invited in, made welcome, and treated with respect."

PEELING ONIONS

Remember in Chapter 3, "The Universal Blueprint," we learned that problem behavior and negative feelings are like onions. Young children are like pearl onions, which are small onions with few layers. Sometimes they react to small events. When we listen to their feelings and connect it with what happened, young children experience great relief and usually move on to something else. Many parents who are used to their children going on and on with their emotions are surprised at how quickly their young children stop fussing once their feelings are noticed and parents show they understand.

Teens and adults are like white salad onions. They have more layers because they experience more complex problems and emotions and have more complicated personalities. Unless they feel safe and trusting (which we promote with these skills) they will not allow others to see their inner layers. Remember, privacy is very important to teens.

Troubled teens and adults are like Bermuda onions, which are the largest onions with many thick layers. These layers are from years of hurt feelings, bad experiences, and unhelpful communication habits. These layers are *not* all from the parent/child relationship. *Any* experience can add a layer to their defensive walls. Just as peeling onions causes us to cry, troubled teens and adults are more hesitant to relive their hurt feelings because of the pain stored inside. When parents of troubled teens use these listening skills, they don't always see immediate changes in their teens' behavior or a willingness to open up. Whenever we listen, however, layers *are* dissolving and doors are opening, even if it's not obvious. The thicker the onion, the longer it takes to peel. Likewise, people with many deep hurts and defensive layers take longer to work through their feelings.

When people are upset, their actions and words can be irrational. This is the surface of the onion. Denying feelings sends the message that we don't understand or can't handle their true feelings (the core of the onion). In return, people shut their emotional doors. Their feelings, however, don't go away! They either build a new or thicker wall to hide them or express them later through misbehavior. If we want our children to trust us enough to shed their outer layers and reveal their inner emotions, we need to build trust and show we understand their emotions (by listening).

If children express strong emotions or behave irrationally, we can recognize it as an onion and know we need to look deeper. Listening helps us find clues to the feelings that are at the heart of the problem. We want to acknowledge what children are feeling and thinking *at that point in time* and connect it to whatever we know about the situation they are dealing with. This lets children know we understand where they are *now*, so they can move on and resolve whatever's bothering them.

Often, when we realize something is bothering someone under the surface, we are tempted to drill down to the core. This is too intimidating and intrusive. People are sure to put up walls to protect their vulnerable hurt. They wouldn't be protecting themselves with layers if they felt safe enough to reveal their true thoughts and feelings. Instead, we need to help people make connections with where they are at that level and just beyond it. Once they feel understood or have insight to what caused the feeling, they release that layer, exposing the next.

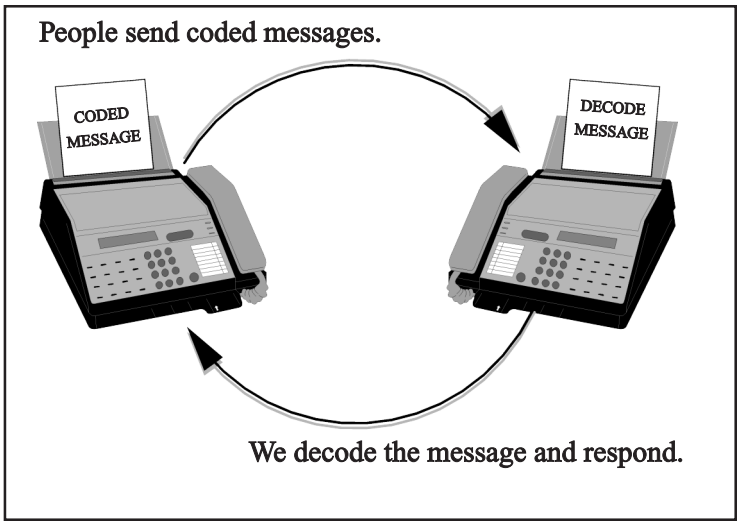
> ***A Graduate's Story.*** *My 13-year-old son has not confided in me for over three years. I always get "Nothin'" and "I dunno" answers to my questions. When I started using the listening tools this week, my son came into my bedroom and started talking to me! He has* ***initiated*** *heart-to-heart talks almost every night! I had to bite my tongue a lot, because I didn't want to shut the door on our communication. The results I got were so immediate, it gave me the patience and motivation to keep trying.*

People often begin a story with a simple or straightforward comment, but something in their nonverbal cues shows there might be more to their comment. Listening helps them connect with those complex, deeper, or hidden thoughts and feelings. The F-A-X Listening Toolset helps people resolve superficial issues and also those that are deep within.

> ***A Personal Story.*** *My parents were true artists at the listening and problem-solving skills. Their attitudes helped me feel safe enough to talk to them about almost anything. Even when they weren't sure of the problem, their responses helped* ***me*** *figure out what was really going on. They asked me questions that got me thinking about how* ***I*** *could solve my problem. I'd usually say, "Thanks, Mom (or Dad)" and they'd reply, "All I did was listen, honey,* ***you*** *figured it out for yourself." And they were right! This boosted my self-confidence and self-esteem. As a teen and an adult, I have used the problem-solving skills to resolve my own problems and the listening skills to support others who were experiencing conflicts.*

FAX COMMUNICATION ☆☆☆☆

Human communication is like a fax machine. A fax machine takes a message and turns it into a code to send across telephone lines. The other fax machine receives these codes, decodes them, and creates an exact copy of the original message. When people express emotions, their thoughts and feelings are turned into verbal and nonverbal codes, which they send to others. When we hear these messages we decode the message so we can understand it. While fax machines have a precise formula for decoding messages, people don't. We take the coded message and filter it through our own code—our beliefs, thoughts, experiences, and emotions. As a result, we often misunderstand someone's message. Usually, when we hear a message, we react to what someone *said.* Often, however, we have misunderstood what that person *means.* Before we respond, we must first check whether we correctly understood the message. There are ways we think, speak, and act that disconnect communication lines. The next few sections identify these barriers and how to avoid them.

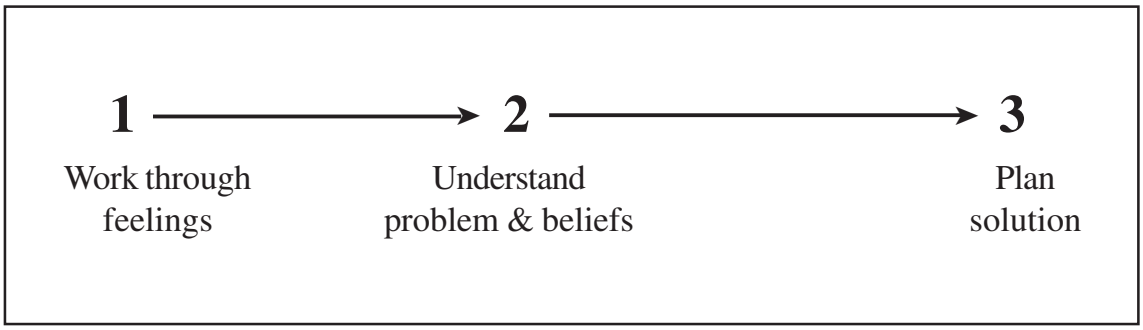


PROBLEM-SOLVING STYLES

We block communication when we make assumptions about *why* people are sharing their problems with us. If we assume they are bringing the problem to us to solve *for* them, we respond differently than if we think they are simply sharing information with us. We must understand how different people solve problems if we are to respond helpfully to everyone.

When people experience a problem, they move through a three-step process to resolve it.

1. They must work through their feelings *first,*
2. Logically understand the problem,
3. *Then* plan possible solutions.



While this three-step process is universal, people differ in two ways:

- Whether they prefer to work out their problems *alone or with others*.
- The *pace* they move through the steps.

Internal Problem Solvers prefer to do their problem solving alone. To be most helpful to these people, we need to give them space and respect their privacy. Assume they can solve their problem unless they suggest, verbally or nonverbally, they are having difficulty. Offer empathy and let them know your "door is open" if they choose to talk. (Don't say "I'm willing to *talk*." Say, "I'm willing to *listen.*")

External Problem Solvers work out their problems with others. These people are relationship-oriented. They tend to be open about their feelings and we can see where they are at each step of the problem-solving process. Just because these people seek others when they have a problem does *not* mean they feel incapable of resolving their own problems. They need to *hear* their ideas, rather than just think them. They need people to show they understand and not take over their problem.

The other difference in problem-solving styles involves the pace people move through the three-step process and where they spend most of their energy. There are two styles: Conquerors and Venters. If we were to compare the problem-solving process to a road trip, Conquerors would take the quickest route possible. Venters would stop to experience each place before moving on to the next.

Conquerors want to get to the bottom of problems and solve them. They tend to be logical people, so they quickly move through the feeling phase of the problem-solving process (step 1). They may not experience emotions strongly or think feelings don't accomplish much. When they talk about problems, they usually comment on the facts (step 2) or possible solutions (step 3).

Venters are usually emotional people who need more time to work through their feelings (step 1) before they can think logically about the problem (step 2). Sometimes their emotions can seem irrational or illogical, but venting releases the emotional energy that is blocking their logic. Once they release this energy, they can think more clearly about solutions (step 3). When Venters talk about problems, they usually mention their feelings and are not necessarily seeking a solution.

Neither problem-solving style is right or wrong. Nor is one style emotionally healthier than the other. People often assume that Conquerors aren't in touch with their emotions. This may not always be the case. At the other extreme, there are Venters who become so consumed by emotions they can't get beyond them to reach a solution.

We usually have one dominant problem-solving style. However, our problem-solving style can change, depending on the type of problem we are facing. For example, we might be a Conqueror at work and a Venter at home or in personal relationships.

If we take these two sets of problem-solving styles, Internal (I) versus External (E) and Venters (V) versus Conquerors (C), we see there are four individual problem-solving styles.

PROBLEM-SOLVING STYLE COMBINATIONS		
	Internal	**External**
Venter	**I/Vs** want to be alone before they release their emotions. For example, they might go to their room, cry, and then write in a journal. When people give them advice, it is an intrusion into their private world.	**E/Vs** seek out others to discuss their feelings and possible solutions, but get frustrated by advice, unless they've had a chance to work through their feelings.
Conquerors	**I/Cs** think through solutions on their own. They usually don't talk much about their problems. If I/Cs have enough time to think, they might be open to advice. Otherwise, it violates their privacy.	**E/Cs** talk to others about the facts of the situation and the ideas they are considering. They might be open to advice, since they think logically and like to hear ideas.

Many communication problems are the result of different problem-solving styles. Knowing your problem-solving style and identifying other people's problem-solving styles can prevent these problems. When problem-solving styles clash, each person assumes the other person solves problems the way they do and responds accordingly. The mistakes usually involve timing or approach.

Timing conflicts are the most common clash in styles. They usually happen when Venters share feelings with Conquerors. Since Conquerors rush through feelings, they mistakenly assume Venters should do the same. They try to "fix" the Venter's problem as quickly as possible by offering solutions (step 3, the Conqueror's strength). Venters think it's probably unwise to accept someone's advice if that person doesn't fully understand the problem (step 1 or 2), so Venters wait for some sign of understanding *before* they move on. When Conquerors try to solve the problem too soon, Venters get frustrated and think the Conquerors still don't understand the problem, so they repeat themselves. Then, Conquerors get frustrated because the Venters are getting *more* upset, repeating themselves, and *still* haven't solved the problem.

Approach conflicts often occur when logical Conquerors ask fact-finding questions, which is frustrating for Venters. Venters can't think about details until they release their emotional energy. When Venters share irrational thoughts, like "I feel like ripping his head off," Conquerors may say, "Why do you let him get to you like that?" and "Why don't you just . . .?" The Venters think the Conquerors are denying their right to be upset and get defensive. Venters are rarely serious when they fantasize, but the fantasy helps them vent faster. When Conquerors think Venters are irrational and are rejecting their advice, they see no point in discussing the issue, because the Venter "won't listen to reason."

Conquerors must bite their tongues when they get the urge to offer solutions or try to change how someone feels. They need to develop more effective listening skills, so they can help Venters move through the problem-solving steps faster, which is the Conqueror's goal.

Venters can usually read other people's nonverbal cues and respond accordingly. Unfortunately, they often assume others can read such hints, so they aren't clear about what they want. When groups of Venters are together they reinforce each other's ineffective communication. For logical Conquerors, interpreting such hints is a foreign passive language. Venters need to be more clear about what they want. They need to explain, "When I come to you with a problem, let me blow off steam. Just try to understand my frustration and feelings. When I *ask* for help or ideas, *then* you can give me advice." Venters also need to learn how to "vent in a nutshell" and get to the point.

While reading this, you were probably thinking about style clashes you have in your adult relationships more than your parent/child relationships. Remember, these skills are useful in *all* human relationships!

A Personal Story. *When my husband and I were first married, I was a Venter and he was a Conqueror. My long stories drove him nuts, so he taught me how to tell a story in a "nut-shell." Feelings were a foreign language to him so I modeled listening and empathy skills when he had problems and suggested more helpful responses when I had problems. (We found marriage communication tapes and books[1] after we had figured this out the hard way!) After fifteen years, my husband is more in touch with his feelings, a better listener, and sometimes talks more than me! Because I do so much listening in my profession, I work through my feelings faster and have less need to vent on and on. We have balanced our differences and met in the middle!*

Many parents, even Venters, try to "conquer" children's problems. This is because most adults believe they are better at solving problems than children and parents should be responsible *for* solving their children's problems. When others have problems, remember it is *their* problem. Join them where they are, instead of trying to push or pull them down the path you think is best. Support them as they try to resolve their own issues and concerns. When people discover their own solutions, they are more likely to follow through on them and remember their lessons.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

Problem-solving style clashes are one reason communication can break down, but there are many others. Think about times when you have a problem or are upset. What helps you feel understood and safe to open up? What causes you to feel defensive and shut your "emotional door"? Most people say they want others to give them their full attention and show they understand how they feel. How do you feel when you get advice? Most people say, "It depends on *when* and *how* people give the advice. If I'm still upset, I get frustrated and defensive. If they tell me I *should* do something I feel like they are trying to control me, but not if they offer it as a suggestion." The same things that help us open our door are the same attitudes and responses that help children feel free to express their opinions and feelings to us.

A Graduate's Story. *As a day care worker, I listen to kids all day long. But when I come home, I throw all my skills out the window! (She is in her "professional" role at work and has parent/child trigger buttons with her own children.) After I read the Universal Blueprint chapter, I realized I wasn't listening to my teenager. I promised to try harder. Since we hadn't gotten to the Child Problem Toolbox yet, I just listened quietly. She really opened up! Then she started telling me things I didn't really want to hear. I started getting upset and telling her what to do. She shut down immediately.*

I was mad at myself. I realized that if I invited her to open up, I had to be ready to handle whatever facts and feelings came up. The next time, I bit my tongue and didn't jump in. I'm anxious, now, to learn what I can say when I have concerns, without taking over or getting upset. (We cover this in the Clear Communication Toolset, since our concerns are Parent problems.)

This mother saw how her attitude and responses caused her daughter to open or close her "emotional door." Many parents, of teens especially, want their children to confide in them and don't understand why they don't. In my "Teens and Parents—Together" class, I ask teens to list the reasons they don't open up to their parents. Here is one list, exactly as they wrote it:

1. Afraid will use against us.
2. I don't have much in common.
3. Don't want them to get mad at me for what I feel or did.
4. If we open up, they will interrupt us and preach.
5. Keep bringing up the past.
6. They try to make us learn from their mistakes, instead of letting us learn from our own mistakes.

If we want our children to confide in us, there are certain attitudes and responses we want to avoid and others we need to adopt.

Door Slamming Attitudes

Distractions. When people are talking, we don't always give our full attention. Our minds wander and we think about what *we* want to say or how we feel about their problem. Sometimes our body language says we aren't paying attention. When we play with objects, look out the window, yawn, or look at our watch, we send the message that we'd rather be somewhere else.

> ***To give your full attention, STOP, LOOK, AND LISTEN—***
> **STOP what you are doing,**
> **LOOK in their eyes (the "windows to the soul"),**
> **and *really* LISTEN.**

Bend or sit at their eye level. Offer a gentle touch (if they are comfortable with this). Lean forward; about one arm's length is ideal. Be relaxed but attentive. Our body language and facial expressions can show warmth and interest, even if we say nothing. We can also use statements such as "Oh?" "Um-hmm," or "Wow!" to show we are listening.

If direct eye contact seems to intimidate or pressure someone, we can wait until we are doing something together, side by side, and are mostly focusing on the activity. These low-pressure, nonchalant conversations are particularly effective for getting teens to open up.

> ***A Personal Story.*** *My mom and I often had discussions while fixing dinner. Although she wasn't always looking right at me, her verbal responses made it clear that she was paying attention and was trying to understand what I was saying or feeling.*

Impatience. Listening takes time and effort. We often become impatient, hoping others will "get to the point." Sometimes we assume we know what they are going to say and interrupt. If we think we already have the answer, we want them to be quiet so we can tell them what to do. Such hurried attitudes are arrogant and disrespectful. They also cause us to take over problems, which deprives children of opportunities to learn problem-solving skills.

It can be difficult to listen to lengthy, detailed stories that are not problems. It's important, however, to listen to these "trivial" things. They are the small tests children give us to see whether they can trust us to handle the bigger problems and more difficult feelings that might arise later. When people go on and on, summarize and clarify what they are saying, "Let me get this straight. First . . . then . . ."

If you are genuinely too busy or distracted to listen, say so, "I can see you're (feeling) and want to tell me more. I'd really like to listen to everything you want to say, but right now I'm (what you're doing). At (give a time) I can sit and hear all about it." Give a specific time and *follow through*. Don't wait for *them* to bring the subject to you again.

Imposing our world on their world. Sometimes, when others express emotions, it triggers unpleasant memories from *our* past. If we don't face and work through these unresolved issues, we get overwhelmed by other people's problems or have difficulty separating our feelings from theirs. If we assume that people are trying to get us to *agree* with their perceptions, we might explain and defend ourselves. This shifts the focus to *us*. There are also times when we simply can't relate to their world. We mistakenly assume that our children (and others) will feel and behave the way we do. We minimize what is important to them or overreact to simple problems. Either extreme causes us to lose our perspective and focus, which needs to be on the person with the problem.

When listening to others, allow them to have different feelings, thoughts, and opinions. If we think about it, every person comes from a slightly different, unique world. People's individual personalities, experiences, beliefs, and interpretations influence their viewpoint. We may not *agree* with people's feelings or perceptions, but we can show we *understand* them.

To really listen, we must consciously work on these unhelpful attitudes. Effective listening involves putting everything else out of our minds to concentrate on what others are saying. We need to put our own feelings and thoughts on hold and put ourselves in the other person's shoes, seeing the situation from their viewpoint. Don't belittle what is important to others. *Their* perceptions are what counts. If we talk, we want to talk about *their* perspective. We need to discipline ourselves to slow down and listen to people *at their pace.*

Door Slamming Responses

People often respond unhelpfully to someone's feelings when they think the person is overreacting or the negative feelings are directed at them. Other times, we are trying to help, but accidentally take over or say something that shuts down communication. Unhelpful comments usually ignore people's feelings or overlook their real meaning. There are several types of responses to avoid, to help others feel safe to open up or express feelings.

Advising or giving solutions.*"You need to . . ." "If I were you, . . ."* When people share problems or express feelings, they are not asking us to take over or give *advice*. When we give advice, it implies others can't solve their own problems. Advice also causes parents to take responsibility for solving children's problems. And if our advice fails, guess who they blame?

Sometimes advice sounds like an order. *"You must . . ." "You have to. . ." "You will . . ."* No one likes to be ordered around. It makes them feel as if they know nothing. Orders can also start power struggles. By doing the opposite, children prove parents can't control them.

Analyzing. *"What's really going on here is . . ." "You must be tired . . ." "You're feeling that way because . . ."* Analyzing focuses on facts, which is frustrating for people who are expressing feelings. They don't want their feelings analyzed. Nor do they want predictions such as *"You'll probably . . . Then they'll . . . You could end up . . ."* These responses sound like we know it all.

Blaming and judging. *"What did you do to make them . . .?" "What did you expect?" "This wouldn't have happened if . . ."* These criticisms treat others as though they are stupid and have poor judgment. People shut their doors to avoid further criticism. When we judge children's feelings and ideas as right, wrong, good, or bad, they conclude their feelings are wrong and they shouldn't trust them. They might even memorize our opinions and not share anything that goes against them. If people trust us enough to share their thoughts and feelings with us, it's important to treat them with respect.

Denying feelings.*"You don't feel that way!" "Don't worry, be happy!"* These responses try to change negative feelings to positive feelings. When we tell people not to feel what they are feeling, they may conclude their feelings are wrong and unimportant—and so are they.

Parents especially want to stop negative feelings when children criticize siblings or parents. Our natural impulse is to defend the person and tell children they must always love their family members. We don't have to agree *or* defend anyone. We can simply acknowledge that right now this is how the person feels. If we start where they are and let them vent their feelings, they will usually to move on to solutions. Later, we can discuss other ways of viewing the situation and responding.

When children react negatively to our requests, we often assume they are *refusing* to cooperate. Usually, children are *willing* to cooperate, they just aren't *happy* about it and want us to know. If we deny children's feelings, they often become more dramatic, to get their feelings across. We can

acknowledge how children feel, without agreeing or disagreeing—or changing our mind. Once we show we understand children's feelings, they are more likely to move on.

Diverting and distracting. *"Don't think about it." "Oh, come on, you look so pretty when you smile." "You think that's bad! Did you hear . . ."* These statements try to distract people from their feelings by changing the subject. They encourage people to avoid problems and feelings, rather than deal with them. They imply that the person's problems are unimportant. Not thinking about a problem, however, does *not* make the problem disappear.

Quick fixes. *"I'll do . . . and then I'll . . . That will make it better." "All you have to do is . . ." "Just hang in there!"* Quick fixes rescue people from their problems by offering simplified solutions. Clichés also fall in this category. Superficial solutions help *us* avoid spending the time and energy it takes to really listen. They also insult others, implying their problems aren't really important or they aren't capable of solving them..

Journalistic questioning. *"Why did you do that?" "Who did it?" "Where . . ."* If we want to know all the details about a problem, we are probably trying to figure out the solution. Such questions leave people feeling like they are getting the "third degree." Fact-finding questions avoid feelings—and until people deal with their feelings, they can't focus on solutions.

People feel especially defensive when we ask "Why" questions. They think we are asking them to justify their feelings. Sometimes, we get non-answers, such as, "I don't know" or "Nothing." These answers are usually true! Often, people *don't* know why they are feeling a certain way or even what they are feeling. They may not have a large feeling vocabulary. Amazingly, when we focus on feelings, people know we want to understand the problem, so they usually volunteer the facts!

> ***A Self-Reminder.*** **I need to know the facts only if I am going to solve the problem. If this is not my problem, I do not need to know the facts, unless they help me better understand this person's feelings or perspective.**

Labeling or name-calling. *"Quit being a cry-baby." "Oh yeah, Mr. Smarty-pants?" "You're acting like a spoiled brat."* These responses are most common when children have negative feelings about us or they are misbehaving (which is an expression of their emotions). No one likes to be called names and the names can create labels that stick. Name-calling hurts people and brings on revengeful behavior.

Telling stories or lecturing. *"When I was your age . . ." "The last time I . . ." "I remember when . . ."* Stories and lectures shift the focus from the speaker's experience to the listener. Stories are helpful *only* if they convey empathy, "I think I may understand how you feel because I've experienced something similar." It is most helpful *after* people have vented their feelings and if the story is brief. The story should show compassion, not impose our ideas on others. Any ideas we share are simply for others to think about and we want to quickly refocus on the person with the problem.

Logical debates. *"That's not how it happened." "Yes, but . . ."* Debating is never helpful. People feel inferior, inadequate, and defensive. Debates cause arguments because people think the listener is trying to change their feelings, opinions, or values. People feel misunderstood and shut down. Allow others to have different interpretations or opinions about the same situation or facts.

Minimizing. *"You'll get over it." "Be tough!" "It's not worth getting upset over." "It's no big deal."* Sometimes, listeners try to avoid dealing with problems by being overly optimistic and pressuring people to change their feelings. If something *is* important to others and we minimize it, they can become very angry, "That's easy for *you* to say!" Thinking we didn't understand, the person either gives up or gets more upset, trying to show us that it *is* important.

Moralizing and preaching. *"You should . . ." "It's your responsibility . . ." "You know better."* The word "should" carries a heavy load of guilt and obligation. People have to feel or handle the problem a certain way or they're wrong. When we give moral sermons, we are talking down to others, which creates resentment. It also implies that people can't figure out the problem or trust their own values and morals. Sometimes we're right, they probably *should* do something. But until people work through their feelings and catch up to us, they won't see the answer for themselves.

Warnings and threats. *"If you don't . . . you'll . . ." "You'd better . . . or . . ."* When we want people to see the negative possibilities of an idea, we sometimes word it like a threat. The power and authority in our tone of voice causes people to feel defensive. Sometimes, when we tell children to stop feeling what they're feeling, they persist—then we threaten to punish them for their insistence. For example, "If you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about." Now the child is upset *and* scared and might cry even harder. These power plays produce fear, submissiveness, resentment, rebellion, and challenge children to test the threatened consequences.

If you've identified unhelpful comments you've made when your children are upset, don't beat yourself with guilt. Remember, we always do the best we can with the information and emotional resources we have at the time. The rest of this chapter explains how to respond helpfully.

F-A-X LISTENING ☆☆☆☆

Communication is a surprisingly complex process—it isn't easy. Hearing a message is different from understanding it. People don't always say what they mean. Their body language can contradict their words. Our brains work so fast, that we can easily misinterpret a message. We need to slow down our thinking, which takes energy and focus.

Effective listening is really a simple process. (Not easy, but simple.) Each step of the F-A-X Listening process matches the three problem-solving steps we just learned. We learn step 1 in this chapter and steps 2 and 3 in the Problem-Solving Toolset. (The Summary Sheet at the end of the Problem-Solving Toolset summarizes *all* the steps of the Child Problem Toolbox.)

- ***F*ocus on feelings.** (Step B1) The first step of F-A-X Listening is, quite simply, how to check whether you decoded a person's message correctly. The secret to decoding messages is to know how to listen to what others *mean,* rather than just hearing words. This process is more of an art and an action skill than an exact science or passive process. We listen with our eyes, ears, brain, and heart (intuition). By using warmth, empathy, respect, and effective listening tools, we encourage people to share their thoughts and feelings and show we understand. People connect with deeper feelings that they might not be aware of yet. This step brings great relief from overwhelming feelings, which may be all someone needs.
- ***A*sk helpful questions.** (Step B2) We can use helpful questions to better understand people's feelings. They still might be upset, though, because they are confused or have inaccurate beliefs about the situation. We can *also* use helpful questions to help them realize, on their own, that there is another way to view the situation. This brings new insights, greater self-understanding, and a readiness to resolve the problem.
- ***X*-amine options.** (Step B3) If people need to plan a response or choose a solution, "Ask helpful questions" (Step B2) *and* "X-amine options" (Step B3) to guide them as they set goals and choose the best solution to meet those goals.

LISTEN

When I ask you to listen to me
and you start giving advice
you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way
you are trampling on my *feelings*.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem
you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked, was that you listen,
not talk or do, just hear me.
Advice is cheap: 35 cents will get you both Dear Abby
and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.
And I can do for myself; I'm not helpless.
Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

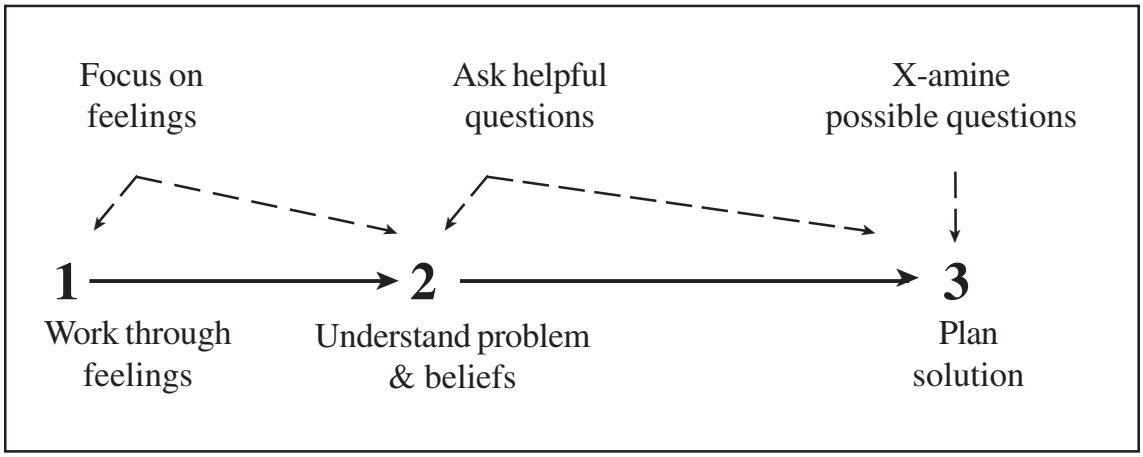
When you do something for me *that I can and need to do for myself,* you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But, when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational,
then I can quit trying to convince you
and can get about the business of understanding
what's behind this irrational feeling.
And when that's clear, the answers are obvious,
and I don't need advice.
Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's
behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people
because God doesn't give advice or try to fix things.
He just listens and lets you work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me. And, if you want to
talk, wait a minute for your turn; and I'll listen to you.

Author Unknown



Step B1: Focus on Feelings ☆☆☆☆

When people are sharing their feelings, use the following three-step process to respond helpfully:

Step B1: Focus on Feelings

a. ***Identify the feeling.*** In our minds, we look for clues to what people are feeling.

b. ***Identify the thought, belief or event.*** In our minds, we look for clues about why people are having those feelings and how they are interpreting the event.

c. ***Summarize, in your own words, what you think they mean.*** We take the clues and use them in our spoken response, to check whether we understood them correctly.

a. IDENTIFY THE FEELING

When children misbehave or express emotions, we ask ourselves, "What are they feeling?" If we aren't sure, we can ask, "How would I feel if that happened to me?" Think of a word that describes the feeling.

- **Don't worry about making children *more* upset by calling attention to their feelings.** Children feel reassured to know their feelings have names—it means they are normal and it must be okay to feel them. When we use feeling words, children learn how to express themselves with words, rather than misbehavior.
- **It's okay to use big words.** If we use feeling words in context, children learn "This feeling is called ___." This is the same way they learn "this feeling in my stomach is called hunger." (My son's first feeling word, at age two, was "embarrassed"—and he was not very verbal.)
- **If we are unsure what others are feeling, it's okay to guess.** If we are wrong, they usually correct us—and by correcting us, they better understand what they are really feeling. "Well, I'm not really *scared*, just *careful*."

★ **If you identify more than one feeling, go with the feeling that is closest to the center of the onion.** "Secondary" emotions come *after* another feeling. For example, sadness is usually the result of something else—loneliness, inadequacy, anger, or depression. All these feelings can appear on the surface to be sadness. It is important to find out the *cause* behind someone's sadness, because it is the feeling that's closer to the core of the problem. This is the feeling we want to reflect back to them, since it helps them feel understood and work through whatever is causing them to feel sad.

> ***A "secondary emotion"* is an emotion that comes after another feeling. The first feeling, which is closer to the real issue, causes the second feeling they are expressing.**

There are two difficulties we often face when focusing on feelings (besides the temptation to use the communication barriers mentioned before):

i. Responding to Nonverbal Messages

When people aren't *saying* anything, we want to tune in to their behavior. Here are some examples of nonverbal clues and their possible meanings[2]:

NONVERBAL CLUE	POSSIBLE MEANING
sagging shoulders	discouraged, exhausted, despair
arms folded tightly across the chest	defensive, impatient, or rejected
clenched hands and jaw	angry or tense
quivering chin	struggling with intense emotion
fidgeting and foot tapping	nervous or anxious

Tone of voice is another clue to the real meaning behind people's words. Emphasizing different words can change the meaning of the same statement. Here is an example from *Listening for Heaven's Sake*[3]:

Actual words: "***I*** didn't say your outfit looked silly."
Interpretation: "Someone else said it was silly."

Actual words: I didn't ***say*** your outfit looked silly.
Interpretation: I may have thought it was silly, but I didn't say so.

Actual words: I didn't say ***your*** outfit looked silly.
Interpretation: It wasn't you I was talking about.

Actual words: I didn't say your ***outfit*** looked silly.
Interpretation: It wasn't your outfit that looked silly, it was you.

Actual words: I didn't say your outfit looked ***silly***.
Interpretation: I didn't say silly exactly, I said it looked unusual.

Sometimes people hide or deny their feelings as a defense mechanism. For example, "It doesn't hurt that bad" or "It doesn't really bother me." Don't assume they aren't really bothered. Instead, lightly acknowledge the underlying feeling in a matter-of-fact way and give them permission to feel that way. For example, "I know you're trying to be *tough*, but it's okay to admit it hurts."

ii. Tuning into Feelings

Many people have difficulty getting in touch with feelings. Feelings can seem like a foreign language if we have any of the following traits:

- Logical and analytical
- Raised in an over-controlling family where negative feelings weren't allowed (learned to stuff or ignore feelings)
- Taught not to express *any* strong emotion, positive (tears of happiness) or negative

Don't view these last two statements as blame or criticism of your parents. Remember, before the 1960s effective listening skills were not commonly known to parents or professionals. There was little information about the mind and emotions. If the information was not available to our parents, they could not have taught it to us. They, too, did the best they could with the resources they had.

If you struggle to find a name for feelings, the cartoon on the next page might be helpful.

b. IDENTIFY THE THOUGHT, BELIEF, OR EVENT

Usually, a person's statement includes one of the following clues:

- The event that caused the feeling.
- The person's beliefs or thoughts about the situation, which influence their perceptions and feelings.

If we are confused about *why* a person has these feelings, we can clarify facts without using journalistic questions. We do this by tying the facts to the feeling they caused. For example, "Let me get this straight. First this happened . . . then you felt . . . so you did . . ."

Be careful not to confuse thoughts and feelings. For example, "I feel the teacher shouldn't give us so much homework." The *belief* is that the teacher is giving too much homework. The *feeling* might be "overwhelmed" or "frustrated." We learn in Chapter 9, "Keep Your Cool Toolset," that our feelings are a direct result of our beliefs about an event. If our beliefs are inaccurate or unhelpful, we experience misguided or unhelpful feelings. As we listen to others, their statements often reveal these inaccurate or unhelpful beliefs. For example, a child might say, "My coach doesn't like me because she told me I could do better." The child is *assuming* the coach said this because she didn't like her, which might not be accurate.

Try to balance thoughts and feelings. If we overemphasize thoughts, we tend to forget about people's feelings and start analyzing or judging. If we focus only on feelings, however, we might feed into inaccurate beliefs. We need to maintain our objectivity while remaining in touch with the other person's feelings and perspective.

c. SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU THINK THEY MEAN

First, we listen intently, identifying (in our minds) the speakers' feelings and thoughts. Then we check whether we understood them accurately by restating *in our own words* what we think they mean.

So we don't come across like a know-it-all, we can end our statement with a questioning tone of voice. Even if we're sure we are correct, we are usually better received if we sound like we are "checking this out," rather than *telling* them what they are feeling.

Here are some possible responses:

- ➤ "You sound like you're feeling . . ."
- ➤ "So you believe/think/feel . . .?"
- ➤ "Correct me if I'm wrong, but . . ."
- ➤ "Let me get this straight. You think/feel . . ."
- ➤ "Are you saying . . .?"
- ➤ "From your point of view . . ."
- ➤ "I wonder if you're thinking/feeling . . ."
- ➤ "Do you wish . . .?"

Important Points to Remember

- **If you identify inaccurate beliefs, do not *tell* people their viewpoint is wrong.** In the example about the coach, it is accurate, but unhelpful, to say,"You're overreacting. Your coach likes

you. She probably just wants you to try harder." Many children would think or say, "No she doesn't! I was already trying as hard as I could!" Now the child thinks we are siding with the coach and gets more upset because we don't understand. Instead, we can *repeat the belief in a slightly different way* so the child hears what was really said. We might say in a questioning tone of voice, "So she wants you to do your best because she doesn't like you?" When people hear their beliefs restated, accurately but differently, they see *on their own* that they might be misinterpreting the situation.

If they are too upset to see this, don't pursue the belief any further until they work through their feelings. Examining beliefs is a logical process. When they move to the next step, "understanding the problem or beliefs" (B2), we can ask helpful questions to explore this area again.

- **Use the word "I" cautiously; use "you" whenever possible.** If this is a Child problem, we want to keep the ball in the child's court. When we say "I," we are talking about us, not them. "I" often leads to personal opinions or advice, so it is usually a barrier. Likewise, be careful using the word "we," especially when talking about the other person's responsibilities, such as school, work, or chores. "We" implies that the task is partly our responsibility. This might result in people accepting less than total responsibility for the solution or fostering dependency on others to solve their problems.
- **Don't repeat names people call themselves or others.** If children say they're stupid or ugly, don't use the names in your response. You don't want to give the negative more power or seem as if you are agreeing with them. Instead, get in touch with what happened and how they feel about it. For example, "I bet it was really *frustrating* to have to spend a whole hour on your homework, when you thought it would only take 20 minutes" or "Do you feel *self-conscious* in your bathing suit?"
- **Match your tone of voice with their emotional intensity.** Don't overreact to what people say, "I bet you *hated* the teacher calling on you." The child might have felt just slightly embarrassed. On the other hand, if someone is furious, don't calmly say, "You're angry." Instead, say with emphasis, "You're *furious*!" We don't have to *act* furious, just emphasize the word so people know we understand how strongly they feel the emotion. If they are out of control, we can use our words and tone of voice to show we understand, but control our own emotions. This helps people regain control, without dismissing their feelings.
- **Our words, tone of voice, and body language *combined* communicate whether we understood someone.**

  A Personal Story. *When I was selecting my son's preschool, I visited a school that taught S.T.E.P.[4] classes to their teachers and parents. Since I knew the skills and philosophy would be consistent with mine, I was optimistic. I observed a young child who was sitting at a table crying. Her teacher walked up to her, remained standing, put her hands on her hips, and said in a deadpan voice, "You're sad because you can't play with the blocks right now." While her words were constructed according to all the rules, her body language said she didn't really care how the child felt. She looked irritated to have to deal with the child's feelings. Had she knelt down next to the girl, put an arm around her, and sounded more empathetic, she would have been much more effective.*

Universal Formula for Effective Listening

When we combine the three steps for focusing on feelings, we get a simple formula for responding to people's problems.

"You sound like (or similar opening) you're feeling (feeling), because (event, thought, or belief)."

As you become more comfortable responding to feelings, you will develop your own personal style. Just remember to include the three a-b-c steps: (a) identify the feeling, (b) identify the event, then (c) summarize what you *think* they mean in your own words. In the following statements, the feeling and event words are emphasized, so you can see how they fit together in various, more comfortable statements.

- That *math problem* is really *frustrating*!
  (event) (feeling)
- It's *irritating* to *be bothered* when *you want time alone*, huh?
  (feeling) (event) (thought)
- I can tell you're really *excited* about *the pool opening* tomorrow!
  (feeling) (event)

To respond to nonverbal clues, match a feeling word to the behavioral clue, like the following examples.

- When I *see you smile* like that, I can tell you're *having fun*!
  (behavior) (feeling)
- I *see you wandering around*, like you *don't know what to do*. Are you *bored*?
  (behavior) (event) (feeling)
- You seem *quiet*. Is anything *bothering* you?
  (behavior) (feeling)

Sometimes people have contradictory or confusing feelings. It can be helpful to let them know this is natural and normal.

- Sometimes you *like* playing with Tommy, but not *when he's bossy*.
  (feeling) (event)
- In some ways you are *glad* you *weren't invited to her party*, because *you don't really like her*,
  (feeling) (event) (thought)

  but you feel *left out* too."
  (feeling)

What Do I Say Next?

When we first start using these listening skills, we can usually think of a first-response, but don't know what to say next. Our first response opens the door and children usually start sharing more. Many parents panic at this point. We just continue reflecting the thoughts and feelings we hear.

Continue reflecting the thoughts and feelings you hear, until:

1. The person vents the emotions, feels better, stops sharing, and *moves on*.
2. The person expresses *confusion* about why the problem happened or talks about logical facts. At this point, move on to the next step, "B2: Ask Helpful Questions."

Here is an example of a listening conversation between a mom and her 13-year-old son.

A Graduate's Conversation.
Adam: Dad wouldn't let me talk in the car tonight.
Mom: You sound hurt that he told you not to talk.
Adam: Yeah, he said, "Mike, don't say anything," right in front of the girls, like it's all my fault.
Mom: Do you feel like Dad is blaming you for the squabbles in the car, the teasing?
Adam: Yeah, he thinks it's my fault, but they always start it. They're always saying something.
Mom: It's rotten to take the blame for stuff like that.
Adam: I just shut up. I didn't say anything.
Mom: So you didn't say anything at all?
Adam: No, I didn't say anything the whole way home.
Mom: What happened?
Adam: Dad just talked to them.
Mom: How did that go?
Adam: Okay. They just talked and I didn't say anything.
Mom: Were there any fights?
Adam: No.
Mom: Does that work okay for you?
Adam: I guess.

Here, Mom didn't want to defend Dad or the girls, or offer a solution. She felt it was more important to **F**ocus on her son's feelings and leave the "ball" in his court. She could have taken the next two steps, **A**sking helpful questions and **X**-amining possible options, which she might do if the same problem occurs again.

When Not to Use Listening Skills

- **Sometimes we can overdo reflecting statements.** You don't have to respond to every frown or comment—use discretion. You will learn to recognize when people want to talk and when they don't. You'll also learn when it's best to give a nod, a comment, or say nothing at all.
- **Don't try to force people to share their feelings.** A power contest could result if you push the matter. Let them know you are willing to listen and they are free to talk or not talk. Don't be discouraged if people don't open up to you quickly. This is a new experience which may be uncomfortable for them. If you've had unhealthy communication in the past, they might be hesitant to open up. Give them time and space, to rebuild trust.
- **Turn complaints into requests and ask people what they want.** For example, "You think the carrots look dirty when the skin's on. Would you like them peeled?"
- **If someone is trying to involve you in unhealthy or inappropriate interactions**, such as gossip, simply nod your head or give a dull "um," then refuse to discuss the topic further. Change the subject or stop making eye contact.

TIPS FOR TOTS AND TEENS

Communication is a skill that can take young children some time to develop. Older children who can speak quite well, sometimes express their feelings and opinions quite bluntly, which can trigger parents' reactions and shut down communication. The following tips will help you adjust the skills we just learned when listening to younger children or teens.

Young Children

- **As children mature, their ability to express emotions appropriately can be inconsistent.** One day children may manage a situation or emotion well and the next day fall apart over the same incident. This is normal. If adults have difficulty at times handling their emotions, just imagine what young children, with their limited experience and vocabulary, face when coping with their feelings. Remember that "three steps forward, one step back" is still progress.
- **Young children don't usually verbalize feelings well, they act them out instead.** Learn to watch their body language. Their facial expressions and body language will offer clues to what they are feeling and trying to say.
- **Respect the importance of security objects.** One way young children cope with emotions is to depend on objects. Sucking a thumb or hugging a blanket is not a sign of weakness. It is usually a temporary means of managing their emotions. Respect children's needs as you teach them to use feeling words. Be there to offer hugs and an empathetic ear, so they learn how to get human reassurance instead of always looking to objects for security. As children improve their emotional vocabulary, they will use words more often to express their feelings.

  A Graduate's Story. *I took Adam, my three-year-old son to the dentist, who told me he was developing an over-bite. The dentist suggested Adam give up his pacifier (which he calls a "sucky.") I asked the dentist to tell my son, so he would hear it from someone other than me. He told Adam, "You might want to start thinking about not taking it anymore because . . ." and explained why. On the way home, Adam held the pacifier, saying, "I really like my sucky." I said, "Yeah, it's really nice to have that sucky. What did the dentist say would happen if you sucked it?" I was careful to let Adam own the problem. My past efforts at weaning him told me I could easily get into a power struggle if I tried to take over the decision. I just kept acknowledging his feelings and the difficulty, "It must be hard not to use something you really like to use." Adam never used his pacifier again. For several days, though, he still held the pacifier for security. I know that if I hadn't learned how to reflect feelings and keep the ball in my child's court, I would have started lecturing him and forcing him to give up his pacifier. While I might have made Adam give up a bad habit, it would have been in an unhealthy way. Instead, Adam weaned himself, which showed him the inner strength he possessed.*
- **Use listening skills with even the youngest infants.** Infants are born with the ability to communicate; at first, they use crying and nonverbal cues. The understand *our* words before they can speak clearly. The especially understand the meanings of our tone of voice and facial expressions. Responding to infants' nonverbal language and acknowledging their feelings builds trust, promotes bonding, and increases intellectual, emotional, and language development. If we practice listening to infants, we feel more comfortable with the skills when they begin to use words.
- **Listening skills also increase young children's vocabulary.** While our children are learning words like "ball" and "cup," they can also learn words for their feelings. When we play with young children, we can give their dolls, stuffed animals, or puppets feelings that children or others might have. As they develop their feeling-word vocabulary, they are more able to talk about their own feelings.
- **Don't expect young children to understand another person's perspective.** Statements such as, "How would you like it if someone took your toy?" are probably meaningless. Young children are "egocentric," which means they are the center of their world. They are learning about the world from *their* perspective at this age. As they mature, they will naturally become more aware of others' feelings and needs. (In Chapter 10, "Clear Communication Toolset," there are specific tools for helping others understand your feelings or viewpoint.)

Teens

- **It is important for teens to separate from their parents and have individual opinions.** Such independent thinking is a strength that will help them as adults. If we try to make teens do what *we* think is best, we end up preaching and they become argumentative. Instead, we need to talk *with* our teens, not *at* them. We need to let our teens know we are on their side. We can support their individuality (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) and listen with respect to their ideas. If they seem to go astray, we can use the other F-A-X Listening steps (B2: Ask helpful questions and B3: X-amine possible options) to guide them to their own revelations and solutions.
- **Ask teens if they *want* to discuss their experiences with you, but don't be offended if they don't.** Teens usually handle crises within their peer group, so it is important for teens to have assertive, respectful communication and conflict-negotiation skills they can use. If we stay on the fringes of their activities, we are not invading their privacy but are available for discussions that build trust and open communication.
- **Teens can think logically *and* abstractly.** They seem to understand human behavior better than many adults. They are usually also searching for spiritual truths during these years. Discuss logical, psychological, and spiritual topics in impersonal ways, as a general conversation to understand each other's opinions better. These are opportunities to contribute "pearls of wisdom" and learn more about your teen's values and perceptions. These conversations build trust and give you insight to their inner world.
- **Teens do not want instant understanding and pat answers to their problems.** When they experience a conflict, they feel unique, as though they are the only ones who have experienced this exact problem before. While many teens experience common problems, each person lives in an individual world and their experience, to some extent, *is* unique to them. Comments such as, "I know just how you feel" or "I went through the same thing when I was your age" can sometimes be reassuring, but more often they frustrate teens. It makes their problems and their feelings seem so simple, when the problems feel so complex and mysterious to them.
- **When teens are upset, don't belittle their distress.** Acknowledge how important and confusing it is to them. Help them view their mistakes and problems as opportunities to learn skills and develop strength of character. Let them know that there is *no* problem too big to handle. Tell them that no matter what, you will be there for them and support them.

FINAL POINTS

Trouble-Shooting Guide for Listening to Feelings

If your attempts to listen seem less than successful, ask yourself these questions:

- Did I use a feeling word in my response?
- Did I *tell* the child how to feel or did I guess how the child *might* be feeling?
- Did I simply repeat the child's words or did I summarize in my own words?
- Did I reveal anything that might be closer to the real issue than what the child presented?
- Did I offer a quick solution, brush off the feelings, or use any other communication barriers?

Dealing with feelings is an art, not a science. It is a process, not a procedure. Knowing the exact words to say is not as important as conveying warmth and empathy. It is normal to feel uncomfortable with this new way of speaking and listening. After a while, we sense what is helpful to an individual (child, partner, co-worker, etc.) and what isn't. We discover what frustrates them and what calms them. Soon, we find ourselves using the tools without thinking.

When we accidentally shut the door on someone's feelings, we can always go back to repair the damage. Just say, "I've been thinking about what you said about . . ." Don't give up on the tools if they don't seem to work right away. Give yourself and others time to adjust to these new ways of communicating. Focus on the quality of your long-term relationship, not the immediate response to a single situation. You are making a life-long investment in your relationship when you take the time to listen.

SUMMARY SHEET
F-A-X LISTENING TOOLSET

F-A-X COMMUNICATION ☆☆☆☆

Parent problems: Listen before you talk. Double-check the message.
Child problems:
Avoid taking over their problem.
Start where others are—don't push your views or solutions.

Problem-solving styles

- **Internal** problem-solvers need space and time.
- **External** problem-solvers need to bounce ideas off others.
- **Conquerors** rush through feelings and focus on facts and solutions.
- **Venters** need to express feelings before thinking rationally about solutions.

Avoid communication barriers

Unhelpful Attitudes:

- Distraction
- Impatience
- Judging feelings
- Imposing our world on theirs

Unhelpful Responses:

- Advising or giving solutions
- Analyzing
- Blaming and judging
- Denying feelings
- Diverting and distracting
- Quick fixes
- Journalistic questioning
- Labeling or name-calling
- Telling stories or lecturing
- Logical debates
- Minimizing
- Moralizing and preaching
- Warning and threatening

F-A-X LISTENING ☆☆☆☆

Focus on feelings ☆☆☆☆

a. Identify the feeling
Stop, Look, and Listen.
Avoid reacting to surface emotions and behaviors.
Look for clues to feelings underneath (including nonverbal signals).
Choose a feeling word.

b. Identify the thought or the event causing the feeling.

c. Summarize in your own words what you think they mean. ☆☆☆☆
Give wishes in fantasy.

Keep reflecting until people move on, express confusion, or are ready to discuss possible solutions.

PRACTICE EXERCISES

Read each child's statement. Acknowledge the child's feelings by following the three steps we learned for planning a helpful response:

Step B1: Focus on feelings
a. Identify the feeling.
b. Identify the event, thought, or belief causing the feeling.
c. Respond by summarizing, in your own words, what you *think* the child *means*, to show you were listening and understand.

(Plan *your* response before reading the answer key, which offers *one possible* response and extra pointers to keep the lines of communication open.)

1. "Emily is spending the summer at her grandmothers! She's my best friend!"
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
2. "I'm scared to go to bed. There's a monster under my bed that comes out in the dark!"
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
3. "I don't feel like cleaning the toilets! I'll do it after I play."
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
4. "I played soccer at recess. Brandon and Chris were the captains and I was the last one to get picked." *(What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)*
5. "I can't believe I missed that catch. We lost the game because of me."
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
6. "Why do I have to get my picture taken? I hate to smile with these braces on."
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
7. Your preteen daughter says, "I'm not sure if I'm going to Tom's party. John will be there."
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)
8. "Finals are next week and I've got to work every single night!"
   (What is this child feeling? Why? Check this out with your response.)

Possible Answers

While you probably identified similar feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and events, the following answers might vary from your answers. There is no one right response. If your answer differs, look at the trouble-shooting guide.

Imagine how the conversation would go after our first response. At the end of the next chapter, we continue the conversation using the next two steps of F-A-X Listening, **A**sk helpful questions and **X**-amine possible options.

1. "Emily is spending the summer at her grandmothers! She's my best friend!"
   *Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs***:** sad, because the friend will be gone a *long time* and the child will *miss* her.
   Listening response: "You're really going to *miss* her, aren't you? (pause) All summer sounds like a *long time*, doesn't it?"

   Avoid glossing over the problem with a quick fix, "She'll be back at the end of the summer. You'll see, time will fly." If the child nods her head after our first response, we can ask helpful questions. (We'll continue this conversation in the next chapter.)

2. "I don't want to go to bed. There's a monster under my bed that comes out in the dark!"
   *Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs***:** scared, because she *believes* there are monsters or that things are *different* in the *dark*.
   Listening response: "It must be scary to think there is a monster there."

   Notice how this possible response acknowledges the child's fear and the possibility that things look different in the dark, but does not feed the inaccurate belief in monsters? Once we've acknowledged the child's feelings, we can ask helpful questions. (We'll discuss fears more in the next chapter and continue this conversation in the answer key there.)

3. "I don't feel like cleaning the toilets! I'll do it after I play."
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: torn between work and play.
   Listening response: "I know it's *hard to work* when you'd *rather be playing*."

   This is a trick question, because this was really a Parent problem—until the child refused. Then it became a C/P problem. We need to back up and acknowledge their feelings *before* setting limits. Often, if we notice their feelings, they move on and do as we request. If not, we can use the Cooperation Toolset, "When you're done with the toilet, you can go out and play." If children persist, we can use helpful questions or problem solving to resolve the problem without a power struggle. (See the next chapter for specific ideas.)

4. "I played soccer at recess. Brandon and Chris were the captains and I was the last one to get picked."
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: left out or *rejected, disappointed,* or *discouraged,* because he was the *last child chosen* for the team.
   Listening response: "It *hurts* to be *rejected*." Or "It's *discouraging* to be the *last one picked*."

   Children might assume that Brandon and Chris didn't pick them because they don't like them or aren't their friends anymore. If we bluntly point out false beliefs, we sound like we are criticizing or disagreeing that there is a reason to feel bad. If we listen effectively, children might share their reaction to being chosen last. Perhaps they decided to sit out the rest of recess. We can use helpful questions and problem solving to help children see that this is not their only option and plan a better response if it happens again. (See the next chapter for ideas.)

5. "I can't believe I missed that catch. We lost the game because of me."
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: disappointed, sad, and *blames self* for *missing* the catch.
   Listening response: "I can tell you're really *disappointed* you *missed that catch.* It's *hard* to *make a mistake* at such an important time."

   When children are being hard on themselves, we often try to cheer them up with logical explanations, such as "You might have lost the game anyway," or "Lots of people miss catches." While these might be true statements, children think we don't understand how rotten they feel. Beyond the actual loss, children probably think they let down the team and that the other teammates are angry with them. Or maybe they are so embarrassed they can't face their teammates. Avoid smoothing over their concerns with, "I'm sure they still like you." Their concerns might be valid! Once they are thinking logically, you can start asking helpful questions. (See the next chapter for ways to help the child consider a different point of view.)

6. "Why do I have to get my picture taken? I hate to smile with these braces on."
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: self-conscious or unattractive *wearing braces* for the photograph.
   Listening response: "Are you feeling *self-conscious* about *wearing braces* in your pictures?"

Avoid the temptation to say, "But you look nice with braces." Even if this is true, children will rarely believe it. Start where they are, but don't agree they look "ugly." Also avoid smoothing over their feelings, "You'll see, your teeth will look nice when your braces come off." Again, this is probably true, but that's not how they feel *now*. Even if children's perceptions are inaccurate, acknowledge how they see things. Once children know we understand, we can use questions to help them consider different viewpoints and options for solving the problem. (See the next chapter to continue this conversation.)

7. Your preteen daughter says, "I'm not sure if I'm going to Tom's party. John will be there."
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: hesitant to see John, so *unsure* whether to go to Tom's party.
   Listening response: "You sound like you *aren't sure* you want to *see John*. Any particular reason?"

   Don't ask, *"Why* do you want to avoid John?" We would be assuming she wants to avoid him or that he's been mean. She could have a crush on him! If we jump to conclusions and we are wrong, she will conclude we aren't listening or get defensive. If we listen effectively, she will probably reveal the *real* reason she doesn't want to see John (he's mean to her, she has a crush on him, or another reason). Then we can ask helpful questions to help her explore options. (See the next chapter to continue this conversation.)

8. "Finals are next week and I've got to work every single night!"
   Child's feelings, thoughts, beliefs: pressured or *overwhelmed,* because finals and work schedule conflict.
   Listening response: "Wow, you're under a *lot of pressure* right now. You have *extra studying* you need to do, but they *need you at work*, too."

   If you have a teen who has a job *and* cares about studying—count your blessings and don't offer any advice! Make sure you give this teen credit for being a responsible worker, who doesn't want to let the employer down, *and* a responsible student who thinks about schedules in advance. Then move to the next step by asking a few helpful questions. (See the next chapter to continue this conversation.)

WHAT'S NEXT

If we practice these listening skills often, in *all* our relationships, others will start sharing more with us. We will feel more comfortable with the language of effective listening and see how our attitude and skills promote greater understanding in our relationships.

"**F**ocus on feelings" is just the first step of F-A-X Listening. In Chapter 8, "Problem-Solving Toolset," we learn what to do, beyond listening, to guide people through the problem-solving process. We learn the last two steps of F-A-X Listening: "**A**sk helpful questions" and "**X**-amine possible solutions."

REFERENCES

1 Two helpful resources for more information on male/female communication styles are *Hidden Keys to a Loving Relationship*, by Dr. Gary Smalley (a videotape series, 1993) and *Men Are From Mars, Women are From Venus,* by Dr. John Gray (HarperCollins, 1992).

2 *Listening for Heaven's Sake*, by Dr. Gary Sweeten, Dave Ping, and Anne Clippard (Teleios Publications, 1993) p. 89.

3 Ibid. p. 91.

4 *S.T.E.P. (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting)*, by Donald Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay (American Guidance Service, 1982).