

Balancing Listening and Action is Key to Supportive Parenting

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Abstract

Parents convey high-quality listening when they pay close attention and show acceptance and comprehension of what their child expresses. These qualities may be fundamental in enhancing closeness and autonomy, increasing well-being, and fostering future self-disclosures. The balance between parental listening and action may depend on the domain of interaction. When children and parents are exploring each others' perspectives or sharing, and where children are seeking comfort for worries or sadness (attachment), listening dominates. When parents are called to discipline or keep safe, listening helps inform parents' actions, but may need to be curtailed to ensure effective action. Models of parental listening and action represent a next step in the literature and inform research in self-determination theory and perceived parent responsiveness.

Keywords: *Listening; Parenting; Family Domains Framework; Autonomy; Responsiveness; Self-Determination Theory*

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The parenting journey is marked by many discrete, important conversations: When children reach out for help, share a secret, break a rule, or put themselves in danger, parents' reactions can determine the impact of those conversations on children's emotions and behaviors. Should a parent hear them out if youngsters argue for more screen-time before bed? What if they want to go to an unsupervised party? Or should parents act, forgoing listening to make the 'right' decisions for their children?

The first of these options refers to an important tool available to parents, namely high-quality listening. This is more than just 'hearing a kid out'. High-quality listening employs non-verbal and verbal behaviors to convey (1) that parents are paying attention (e.g., expressed through eye contact, absence of disruptions); (2) that they are doing so with love and valuing (e.g., expressed through warm and soft verbal and non-verbal behaviors); and (3) that they understand the child or what they say (e.g., expressed through reflections or summaries of what children said [1,2]. All three qualities must be conveyed for the child to perceive, holistically, that they have been listened to [3].

High-Quality Listening in Parenting

High-quality listening was first conceptualized within the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers [4]. Rogers described that optimal listening attends to the other's needs, understands the holistic meaning, provides unconditional positive regard and a non-judgmental atmosphere, and responds to emotions as conveyed through the speaker's verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Over sixty-five years later, a meta-analysis following PRISMA guidance identified broad empirical evidence in favor of applying a Rogerian perspective to current parenting perspectives. Its findings suggested that when parents do not provide the kind of support Rogers described (i.e., they provide conditional regard), children report detrimental

outcomes including contingent self-esteem and depression, and lower relatedness [5]. Setting aside this evidence in favor of parents providing an unconditionally positive climate, there is surprisingly little research, to date, that systematically examines the specific role and expression of active or high-quality listening in the parenting domain.

We review below the emerging work that does speak to the humanistic view. Such work highlights that high-quality listening is an important part of the parental relationship that underlines parent-child closeness and child well-being. Studies on parental listening recognize, as Rogers did, that many of its features are shared between parenting and other relationships (e.g., in workplace settings, friendships, therapists or even conversations with strangers [6]). One such study [7] conducted interviews with 30 parents of socially transitioned transgender youngsters ($M_{\text{age}} 11$ years) to investigate ways to support a transgender youths. Listening was conceptualized as parents' reports of listening as following a child's lead, while conveying unconditional regard and acceptance of children. A parent-participant expressed "I would say make a child happy, you know, at all costs, listen to your child" (p. 237) while another said, "If you're tuned in to your child, and you're listening to your child, you really can't go very far wrong" (p. 239). Those statements, though anecdotal, express the importance of high-quality listening in supporting youngsters' self-acceptance and expression. Meta-analytic work provides stronger, but indirect evidence for the importance of listening for supporting parenting. When listening training is embedded among other emotional communication strategies, it provides among the most robust benefits to children's experiences of support across parent training programs [8].

Despite key qualities of listening shared between parenting and other relationships, the listening process may in certain ways be different within the hierarchical parent-child relationship than in horizontal relationships such as with friends or romantic partners [9].

Mentions of 'listening' are part of the currency of family life, and parents and children may request, "I need you to listen now," or complain, "I don't feel listened to." But there is an asymmetry in the roles of parents and children/adolescents [10]. Parents are challenged to listen to a broader range of young people's experiences, including their emotions, experiences, and requests. On the other hand, kids are predominantly asked to listen to requests [11]. Parents aim to be a listener, while many of the topics for which a parent seeks a listener (such as problems with a work colleague) are not appropriate to their children. As a result, the task of high-quality listening as the basis for closeness and child well-being may lie primarily with the parents, rather than the children.

This and other features of listening may be especially characteristic of the hierarchical relationship of parent and young person because parents play key and unreciprocated roles in shaping children's growth. For example, an analysis of anger experiences shared by adolescents to both parents and friends showed different types of listening across relationships. Mothers provided a more elaborative, emotion-focused context for sharing stories, whereas friends fostered a playful, creative narrative [12]; presumably, the mothers' focus leaned into their children's emotional development. Further research is needed to understand the distinctive and shared characteristics of parental listening. Most existing models highlight shared characteristics (e.g., conveying attention, comprehension, and positive intention) across interpersonal relationships [13] including parenting [14], but may have overlooked distinct qualities of parent-child conversations and the role of listening within them.

High-Quality Listening and Action in Parent-Child Domains

It is clear from the developmental studies reviewed above that high-quality listening is important to parent-child conversations. Many parent-child activities entail a supportive shared experience that is an end in itself. However, commonly when or after parents listen to children,

there is also a need for the parent to take action, to comfort, guide or state an expectation, to come up with a solution, or to ensure the child's safety. In different relationship contexts, the ideal expression of both listening and action may differ in terms of their proportional contribution to the particular parental response and their specific qualities in the moment. For example, parents may have to comfort children when upset or worried (they listen then act to help, for example through providing comforting messages [15]), hear the story of something that happened at school (through pure, mindful listening [16]), or intervene with a child who is self-harming (listening with necessary action to increase child receptiveness [17]). Responding to children's needs therefore involves various amounts (little or a lot) of both listening and action; each is ideally sensitive to the particular nature of the parent-child interaction in the moment.

One way to understand those interactions, and listening and action with them, is through the 'Family Domains Framework' (FDF [18,19]), which defines four specific contexts (i.e., domains) of parent-child interactions, demarcated by children's behaviors in the moment, parents' reactions, and the focus and aims of the behaviors of both. Each domain is hypothesized to support a child's development in distinctive ways. A key feature of the FDF is the proposal that parents and their children are constantly 'navigating' between each of the four domains of relating to one another, and that each entails a certain level of sharing, caring, or problem solving according to the particular domain's distinctive 'algorithm of social life' [20,21]. In the following, we will elaborate on these four domains: 'Exploratory,' 'Attachment,' 'Discipline/expectation,' and 'Safety' [18], and describe how the two categories of parental behavior: parental listening and action, could be solely or jointly important when responding to the child in each domain.

Two domains—Attachment and Exploratory—are in play when the child signals a wish to

be comforted or soothed (Attachment [22]), or to enjoy, learn, imagine or be curious together with the parent (Exploratory [23]). From infancy and beyond, the attachment domain, in particular, calls for sensitive responses [24]. Both call for high-quality listening, carefully selected action, and verbal and non-verbal feedback closely attuned to the children. Work supporting this view has shown that children themselves value parental listening during self-expression and self-disclosure; and they value listening even more deeply when their disclosures are intimate versus superficial [25]. Further, experimental studies manipulating parental listening directly highlight its power for promoting a sense of closeness between parents and adolescents when adolescents disclose difficult attachment topics such as rejection and transgressing [2]. Though more research is needed to understand the role of listening in the context of parent-child learning and play (i.e., exploration), indirect evidence for the importance of listening comes from work on educators' listening to pupils during school language learning [26], and from observations that child-led play—in which the prominent voice is the child's—benefit child engagement [27,28]. Together, the existing body of work suggests that during attachment or exploration, listening plays a necessary and sometimes sufficient role for fostering context-appropriate outcomes such as interpersonal closeness, calming, and curiosity and learning.

In contrast to Attachment and Exploratory domains, which are more child-led, Discipline/expectation and Safety are understood to be parent-led, with the parent making clear what behaviors are appropriate, considerate, or respectful, or taking action to reduce risk [29]. Within these domains parents clarify, and at time, emphasize, the parent-child hierarchy, and adopt a guiding and instructional role. This is done through firm tone of voice, contrasted with the tentativeness of listening and the gentleness of attachment, and persistence where the child opposes. These action-dominated domains often have to be implemented rapidly in the moment on the basis of limited understanding of the child's perspective [19]. They also have to be

implemented well. When poorly implemented, many parent-led actions relating to them are ineffective at achieving their aims, or even harmful to children's mental health (i.e., anxiety, depression [30]).

What is the role of listening in these contexts? Building on research showing that children buy into rules when parents provide meaningful rationales and take their perspective [31], listening as a first step may help parents to set and enforce more effective rules that inspire their children's cooperation. Listening may provide the foundation for more effective action for two reasons. First, it might garner children's buy-in through fostering interpersonal closeness. In work on parental listening when adolescents self-disclose a transgression, parents who listened inspired adolescents' sense of closeness and intimacy with them [2]. This relational bond has been shown in other work to increase cooperation that drives cooperation with rule setting [32]. Second, listening may provide the foundation for better informed action that is aligned with the specific needs of the situation. Although there is insufficient work on listening in safety and discipline in the parenting domains, research from other relationships, such as in the workplace [33] suggests that when vertical relationship partners (in this case, parents) 'listen to understand', they gain insight that can help guide their actions and align those actions with the specific demands of the situation. With respect to rule-setting, for example, this may mean setting rules that are better aligned to the capabilities and interests of the child, but which still achieve desired discipline goals.

Research on listening to understand in a parent-child attachment domain further illustrates this point. Analyzing conversations of hurtful events between children aged 13-17 years and their parents, researchers coded observable supportive listening provided by parents [34]. Coders also identified parents' empathic accuracy, the extent to which parents' reports of what their children were thinking matched children's own reports. Findings showed that parents who first provided

supportive listening before intervening had more empathic accuracy than those who engaged predominantly in probing (versus attending and querying more characteristic of listening) or in mutual confrontation in response to children's disclosure.

Considering this evidence, the relevance and accuracy of parental action may be enhanced where there can be a phase of high-quality listening which precedes the implementation of restrictions or rules. Listening may help parents to comprehend their children (and therefore also be able to convey they comprehend their children) because it creates the interpersonal space for eliciting the child's perspective and gathering information held by the child, allowing the parent to build a better understanding of the child's position and needs before intervening. It may also help children feel more interpersonally connected to, and understood by, parents and as a result, receptive to parental rules and restrictions. On the other side of discipline, listening may also provide an important 'debrief' to build the relationship and prepare for future interventions with the child. Exploratory or attachment conversations, dominated by listening, once the Discipline-expectation or Safety tasks are completed, are likely to enhance mutual understanding.

But the role of high-quality listening in these domains is more complicated. It may be that the longer the parent listens when they are seeking to implement discipline-expectation or safety, the greater the possibility of lowering the clarity that action is needed from the child; the parent communicates that the important behavior is negotiable. For example, if a child says before school, 'I don't want to get dressed', exploring those feelings may trigger an Exploratory algorithm for the child and convey acceptance by the parent. Ensuing conversation may increase parents' frustration or impatience as a clear need for behavior becomes the focus of an extended conversation. The parent may find it more difficult to implement calm and clear discipline, or set clear expectations, and the parent-child relationship may be harmed, not helped. Such issues warrant further investigation sensitive to the developmental stage of the child to better understand

the roles of listening and action in these important life contexts.

Listening and Action Expression as Key to Supportive, Responsive Parenting

Evaluating listening and action side-by-side can help researchers understand how parental support is provided through specific conversations and inform existing parent-child relationship frameworks that see listening as a key relationship behavior.

In parenting approaches informed by self-determination theory (SDT [35]), high-quality listening is viewed as a foundational strategy that provides children with autonomy support, the support for volitional and self-congruent action including self-expression. Within this literature, parental autonomy support scales ask about children's perceptions their parents are listening (e.g., Wang et al. [36]), and interventions designed to support autonomy in children incorporate listening as a key supportive strategy [37]. In a recent randomized controlled trial comparing the how-to listen parenting program with a waitlist control group, researchers launched the program by educating parents about how to listen well to their children [38]. These studies have considered listening among other parenting strategies but have not examined the use of listening and action in any single conversation between a parent and child, or within a particular interpersonal domain.

Direct support that listening may be an autonomy-supportive strategy comes from one study [2] that manipulated parental listening through video depictions of adolescents who self-disclosed difficult experiences. When parents were shown to provide high-quality listening, adolescents felt they would be enriched through their honest self-expression, that they would feel self-congruent and choiceful about directing conversations (i.e., autonomy), and that they would experience closeness, trust, and intimacy with parents (i.e., relatedness). In turn, these relationship experiences were linked with an intention to further self-disclose to parents. This study isolated the role of listening in attachment (being rejected) and discipline (vaping)

domains; further research is needed to test listening and action expression in the more specific exchanges within the parent-child relationship.

The accurate use of both parental listening and action, delivered in context-appropriate ways and amounts, may also underlie perceived partner responsiveness within the parenting domain. Perceived partner responsiveness (PPR) is the belief that an interaction partner understands and validates the self and is willing to support one's needs when asked for [39]. Listening appears key to this process: early work using in-depth interviews with 215 fathers highlighted listening as a key quality for responsiveness that allowed fathers to be better attuned with the needs of their children; the authors described this process as the starting point for deep interpersonal connection between parent and child [40].

Listening and action may further help to differentiate the two constructs. Both autonomy support and perceived partner responsiveness refer to a sense of being deeply understood and accepted by one's partner (parent, in this case), an experience to which listening is ideally suited [41]. But perceived partner responsiveness also involves actively responding to the child's expressed needs of the moment, often through specific appropriate actions [42], such as changing one's behavior in requested ways or giving a hug. Listening well can help parents to accurately respond to the child in the moment, and act in ways that are consistent with the stated requests by the child as well as the pull of the particular domain. Appropriate action set in the bedrock of high-quality listening may be essential for children's perceived responsiveness and their feeling of being understood by parents, and there is mounting evidence that feeling understood drives interpersonal well-being in parent-child and other close relationships [43].

Conclusion

The research we reviewed in this paper suggests that high-quality listening is fundamentally important for close, supportive, and responsive parent-child relationships. But

listening alone is not enough, and the interplay between listening and action may inform models of parenting, the parent child-relationship, and even the course of specific conversations and their impacts on well-being and future interactions between parents and children. Interpersonal domains can inform this work. Within Exploratory and Attachment Domains, children may perceive themselves as autonomy-supported when parents simply listen well [14], but subsequent action, even as minor as a parent's own self-disclosure, may be key to perceived parental responsiveness [44]. Within Discipline/expectation and Safety, a parent risks both autonomy support and perceived responsiveness in the interest of protecting the child's welfare, but listening can help to optimize parental action through understanding and protect the parent-child relationship to some extent. However, it may also interfere with rule or consequence clarity. In all, much more research is needed in this crucial relationship context, where specific parental communications have substantial consequences for child well-being, social, learning, and free-time behaviors, and children's own self-regulation across the life course [45].

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Table 1

Family Domains Framework in Relation to Listening and Action

Domain of interaction	Child signalling	Parent signalling	Parent-child intention	Role of listening	Parental Action
Exploratory	Child expresses an interest or curiosity; fun; invitation to parent to participate.	Parent returns curiosity, interest, words and facial expressions follow the child's lead.	Sharing, could be playful or serious. This is the first domain of an interaction where possible.	Central, and could be prolonged.	Nothing to be solved, no or supportive action required; shared interest, engagement, and curiosity.
Attachment	Child conveys sadness, worry, anxiety. These may be conveyed by words, tone of voice or facial expression.	Parent aims to convey empathy through words, tone of voice or facial expression.	Understanding of the emotions and their origins, provision of comfort and calming.	Central, focused on emotions.	Parent seeks to match their action to child emotional needs.
Safety	Child takes risks or acts in a way a parent views as risky.	Parent states the risk and the action needed. Parent is firm, and insistent if needed.	Keep the child safe, create an environment of certainty and predictability. This is the first domain where urgent need.	None or brief if opportunity does not allow. Structured if opportunity allows, but alongside expectations of action. Cross reference to opportunity of listening in Exploratory at another time.	Central role, direct with younger children.
Discipline	Child breaks rules, expresses aggression, or lack of needed cooperation or kindness.	Parent states the rule, expresses expectations clearly, firm and insistent as needed. Provides informative feedback regarding child behavior.	Make clear social rules, promote tolerance of frustration, provide routes to positive interactions.		Central role, clear commands, statement of contingencies.

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Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

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