

## LISTENING TO CHILDREN

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Listening to children, all of us want to, but few really succeed. The question is what listening skills adults do need in order to hear what the child wants us to know, needs us to know. We should engage in a true two-way communication effort. In her research Kiili (1999) discovered that children feel that adults are not really interested in what children have to say. They are mainly interested in the subjects school, homework, bullying and health.

Protecting the child, moreover, will not only mean knowledge for adults about the child, but also translating the knowledge of the child into words, so that the adult can provide the help necessary. The adult knows so much better where and how to get help, the child knows what help it needs.

The past millennium ended with the discovery of the child. The establishment of the rights of children was only ten years old on the threshold of the third millennium. So the challenge of the times to come will be to treat children with respect, and to listen to them as worthy members of our society.

It was not so long ago the child was seen as nothing more than an immature adult (Ariès, 1973). People thought you had to wait until their growth made it possible for them to take their role into society. In the nineteenth century education became a real issue. In the middle of the past century we discovered the adolescent and a thorough rejuvenation of society took place. The challenge of our new century will be to give the very young and the old a respectful place in society. To recognize that they can each, in their specific way, make a contribution to society.

Let me begin with a provocative statement. It is not very difficult not to listen to children, to neglect them, to abuse them. Their dependence on adults, their lack of power, and their known bad memory about their childhood years make it possible for adults to get away with terrible abusive acts towards children. If we could listen to children we would hear all about their problems long time before they tell us, as an adult, how bad their childhood was. But, more important than listening to them, is to enable children to express themselves.

I will divide my lecture into two parts. The first part is about the characteristics of communicating with children, listening skills and the attitude needed to have a real exchange between adults and children. The second part will be dedicated to how organizations can enhance the way they listen to children.

### **The child as an intelligent information processor**

Children are much more intelligent than we always thought. The reason we didn't know this, is perhaps that we had to be convinced in words before we could accept that children have a lively intelligence. For children, however, verbal communication has not the same priority as for

adults. The communication skills children use are much more differentiated than those of adults who put such an emphasis on strictly verbal communication (Schachtel, 1973). In communicating with children it is necessary to take into account the diversity of communication skills, from facial expression to gestures, from verbal expression to drawings.

When becoming older, the use of some forms of expressing oneself decreases; for example leaning against someone when you need support or pointing at something instead of naming it. Kevin, five years old, asked an adult who was busy emptying out a room, '*Where are you going to put that box?*' The adult being busy could not find the right words. Had it been an adult instead of a child who had asked the question he would, at that moment, have put a number of possibilities into words: 'Underneath the window sill? In the left hand corner?' Kevin understood that the language system did not function very well in the bustle and said in a friendly way: '*Just point*', and subsequently correctly put into words the place that was pointed at.

We have a tendency to underestimate the intelligence of children (Katz, 1998) and their silence strengthens this mistake.

Let me give you some examples in order to implement an attitude of respect towards the intelligence of the child. The lively intelligence of children makes it possible for them to master rather easily intricate tasks, adults cannot fulfil without expert training. From birth on, children come to grasp the world around them at an impressive pace.

Adults mainly have the advantage to possess more knowledge. Give the child one language and it will learn it in a way linguists all over the world are still trying to comprehend. Listening carefully to the speakers around him, the infant will discover grammatical rules for itself and make mistakes because it assumes a perfect system, which grammar itself is not. It will say 'I runned' in what could be seen as a too perfect conjugation. Nobody taught the child to say this. When corrected, it readily understands the exception to the rule, applies it and then generalises its discovery to the conjugation of the whole verb and other verbs if necessary (Chomsky, 1975; Kegl, Senghas. & Coppola, 1999). If the baby hears various kinds of sounds then it will classify these as being different languages, 'to eat' and 'outside' together and 'manger' and 'dehors' as belonging to a different group. What is more, when a baby is offered several languages, perhaps two or even three, it will learn all of them.

Nowadays, the computer is yet one more example that shows us the enormous capacity of children to learn. Children are very intelligent information processors. When you put an adult behind a computer, especially with a new program, and you compare his learning speed to that of a child the difference is staggering. The child finds its way easily, it is not hampered by fear. It enjoys discovering the new medium. Its eye-hand coordination is clearly superior to that of the adult, which we see when we look at the way adults and children handle the 'mouse'. The child finds its way through trial and error and learns quickly. Most of the time children enjoy the medium and are not easily frustrated by set backs (Delfos, in press-a).

The child is a true philosopher (Feuerstein, 1981) in its endeavor to grasp the world around him. A three year old girl was very fond of miss Ann, a caretaker of the day care center. It was vacation time and the little girl missed Ann and wondered how long she would have to wait. She asked: 'How many nights do I have to sleep backwards?'

This enunciation is an expression of a true insight in the relationship between the present, the future and the past. What her mistake makes clear is that she has a conception of the present and that she understands that the future has the same relation to the present as the past has. We should wipe the benign smile from our face and be fulfilled with respect at this philosophical insight.

All this is only to awaken your sensitivity to the concept of a child's tremendous intelligence and provoke a readiness to see the child as a companion in helping, and as an expert concerning its own problems.

### **The frameworks of conversations**

Yet we have to know the characteristics of communication with children. Only recently is there an interest in the fact that the way children function in communicative situations is extremely dependent on the knowledge about the *framework* within which a conversation takes place (Elbers, 1991; Flavell, 1985). If no suggestive questions are asked, then children function rather well in situations where they are being interrogated. They can become good witnesses to a crime when they are told the framework of the interrogation and prove to be very little prone to suggestion when it comes to telling their traumatic experiences. But they have to understand what is expected of them. Offering clarity about the framework of a conversation is very important for the quality of the conversation with young children. They are used to being assisted in a conversation by an adult. The adult is even quick to take the responsibility for a conversation and determines the subject and the course of the conversation. The form of conversation in which the adult determines the nature, the subject and the course of the conversation is not suitable in an open question-and-answer situation, a questioning, an interview or an interrogation. Adults are quick to assume that the child knows the rules on which communication is based. But research proves them wrong.

A toddler is explained the rules, like 'not talking before your turn', but the child is quickly assumed to know the rules and they are not made explicit anymore but in a correcting or punishing sense.

The social codes for conversing are often explained to children one-sidedly, namely how they have to adjust to adults: 'Be quiet when I'm talking'. The child hardly learns that these rules are reciprocal, because when communicating the adult usually does not consider the child as an equal partner in communication. Subtle rules like speaking independently, without help from the adult, or waiting when someone has difficulty expressing emotions, the child will only learn by gaining experience with communicating. The child seldom learns these as explicit rules.

Until about the age of eight it is definitely not always clear to children what the *social codes* are underlying a conversation.

Young children for instance think that adults know everything they think and that it is not necessary to give them feedback. They think adults will help them fill in when they don't know. An interrogation is a totally different situation compared to a spontaneous conversation, and the child needs to be told the differences and what is expected of him. It needs to hear in an

interrogation that the adult doesn't know the answers, that he will not help the child unless the child asks for help; that the child should not make something up because the adult needs real information and no fantasy stories, and should be explained why, also that it does not matter if the child has forgotten some things.

### **Fantasy**

The question is whether children are indeed able to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Significant differences can be observed between adults and children in the way in which they deal with fantasy. Firstly the capacity for fantasy within children is larger than that of adults. Children can elaborate extensively on and keep on fantasising about a subject that captivates them.

It is completely implausible that an infant who says that he saw a gnome walking across the grass is suffering from hallucinations and actually sees a gnome. He is perfectly able to experience the difference between a gnome, of which he says is walking on the grass and the dog he actually sees walking there.

A second difference between children and adults in dealing with fantasy is that the inclination of children to communicate whether something is true or fantasised is not big. This is probably the element that makes it so difficult for adults to find out whether a child can make a distinction between reality and fantasy. Young children think that adults are all-knowing, so they will deem it unnecessary to tell the adult that they are switching from reality to fantasy or that a story is completely made-up. Yet they know the difference.

Anyone who plays intensively with children will have had the experience that the child loses track if the adult seems to be completely immersed in the game. For a moment the child does not know for sure whether the adult is aware that it is a game and not reality. The child quickly brings him or her back to reality by saying: *It is not for real, but make-believe*'.

Contrary to Piaget (1954), current researchers indicate that the child is actually able to make a distinction between fantasy and reality. They can already do that when they are two and a half years old, when they are barely capable of expressing themselves linguistically (Fraiberg, 1978). When adults, however, tell them that Santa Claus for example, exists the children will not easily question the credibility of the adult. That does not mean to say that they don't do so internally. They can stay silent out of loyalty to their parents. Even opportunism can play a role, such as the fear of losing presents at Christmas time.

The lack of knowledge about the state of mind of the child can, for an important part, be attributed to the lack of feedback from the child to the adult. The adult can interpret the child's story as a moment where the child does not distinguish fantasy and reality, whereas the child knows the difference but does not communicate this to the adult. In addition it has to be noted that because of a lack of knowledge about the world and the degree of credibility which children attribute to adults, children are regularly taught to receive fantasy as reality. The story of the 'stork' is a good solution for the difficulty adults have in giving sex education, but it distorts the picture that children will form about reality. But children do realise quickly that adults also say things that are made-up and which lead them up the garden path. This could result in children

taking adults less seriously. The same goes for not being understood by adults. When children get the feeling that the adult makes a 'stupid' mistake by not understanding the child, it often switches to fantasy and can get carried away by its story.

### **Suggestibility**

For a long time the reliability of children has been reported on in an extremely unfavourable manner. Until recently it was assumed that children are very *impressionable*, especially young children. They are supposed to be very sensitive to *suggestion*. A more differentiated approach, however, is needed. Just as adults, they prove to be little prone to suggestion when the approach is not to mislead them. Children, when very young even up until three years old, seem to be not very sensitive to suggestion when it concerns something stressful which they have experienced (Davies, 1991). The suggestibility of children decreases from four to eight years and slightly increases from around thirteen (Nurcombe, 1986). On average children prove to be no more dishonest than adults and no less reliable as a witness (Nurcombe, 1986). It is even shown that sometimes children can be better witnesses than adults; this applies especially to children from five to six years old (Elbers & Ter Laak, 1989). The explanation given for this is that children of that age form less schemes about an event and therefore have a less prejudiced view on it than adults; this makes for a more objective and accurate observation.

A nice example of the disformation of the memory by prejudice is the study by Allport and Postman (1947). They showed children and adults two photographs, one of a black man and one of a white man. The white man had a knife in his hand. The young children in general remembered correctly that the white man had the knife; the adults named the black man as having the knife in his hand.

Young children pay more attention to the outlines of an event than to the details, and therefore are more impressionable and prone to suggestion as far as those details are concerned, for example, the characteristics of things or persons instead of the act (Elbers & Ter Laak, 1989). Suggestive questions concerning details of an event or characteristics of persons will therefore not easily be recognized. The child assumes that the adult is serious and does not want to deceive him. As a result of that children don't easily question a statement made by an adult.

A young child when asked whether the balloons in the classroom are red or blue, will not hesitate to name a colour, even if there are no balloons in the classroom. The child shall not, as a matter of course, question the statement by the adult and wonder whether there actually are balloons. The question is not *whether* there are balloons and therefore suggests that there *are* balloons. Subsequently the question is *what* colours the balloons are. Should the same child be asked *whether* there are balloons in the classrooms and if there are what colour are they, the child will answer that there are no balloons and it will also not specify a colour.

Children need to be helped by questions to dwell somewhat longer on details. It should be open questions and no leading ones.

Adults are, incidentally, also very susceptible to suggestive questions (Loftus & Ketcham 1994). The framework of the conversation should be clear as to help the child maintain its logical thinking and create an assertive attitude in the child. A suggestive question put to a child by an

adult is normally received by the child as a serious question with a high degree of truthfulness. The fact that they are substantially less susceptible to suggestion when they talk about a stressful event in which they were involved themselves, or when another child asks suggestive questions, makes one realise that they do make the distinction between 'true' and 'false' and their impressionable behaviour is not a lack of accurate judgment but mainly *social adaptation* to adults. The child probably will know that the question-and-answer situation is not correct, but adapts its answer to what it thinks the adult want to hear.

Apart from that, young children often take statements literally because of a lack of knowledge. They will therefore not easily try to read things into a suggestive statement. They take a question at face value. '*How did you draw that? With a pencil!*'

Suggestibility of children plays an important role in miscommunication with adults. Children don't expect adults to mislead them and therefore are more prone to being manipulated and misled by adults. The influence of misleading information proves to be significantly smaller when it is given by a seven-year old child than when it was the adult who was misleading.

Unreliability of young children when they are functioning as witnesses in interrogations is, for a significant part, based on misunderstandings which occur because the child does not know the rules of the conversation. In the situation at home the forms of communication are much more varied than at school. In the school situation children also have to become familiar with communication principles like the *pseudo-question*. That is a question put by the teacher to which he already knows the answer, but which is only asked to test the child's knowledge. In a school situation children take less initiatives to converse and adopt a more dependent attitude than at home (Elbers, 1991).

The situation of the interview is a rather unfamiliar situation for young children. Characteristic of these forms of conversing is that the adult does not prepare the child for the problem and does not give any help or feedback which is contrary to normal conversations. In order to conduct a productive interview it is therefore important to make the social rules which are part of the contact explicit for children.

### **Characteristics of conversing with young children**

Beside an attitude of respect, the necessity to explain the framework of conversations, the necessity not to ask suggestive questions, to stimulate children to give feedback to adults, and to distinguish clearly between fantasy and reality, there are some general characteristics of conversing with children that can be noted. I will give you some of these. I developed a model of characteristics of conversing with children of different ages, from four to twelve years old (Delfos, 2000, the translation in english -*Are you listening to me? Communicating with children between four and twelve-* is being prepared), but in this lecture I can only give you the brief outlines.

Adults have to adapt their language to the language skill of the child. Adults often make the mistake that when a child is capable of pronouncing the words of a language, it is also capable of formulating the questions which occupies its mind. Certainly until about the age of ten this is

definitely not the case. For example, because children are not able to put the questions they want to ask into words, they can ask *repeater questions*, which means repetition of the same question. Adults not uncommonly interpret this behaviour as inattention and react by saying that they have already given an answer and that the child should listen. A child who repeats the same question over and over again, could be a child who does not listen. But more often it will be a child who tries to achieve a certain answer without being able to formulate the right question for it. Even if the child receives an extensive answer, it will repeat the question hoping to get the required answer. Repeater questions often occur until about the age of eight. Another requirement is choosing a vocabulary that is clear and concrete.

Alternating speaking and playing is helpful with children up to nine, ten years old. Sitting still augments fear in a stressful situation, moving about diminishes fear. That is why it is wise to give the child the opportunity to play and run around after a difficult conversation. They need to come to themselves, just as adults do.

The use of metaphors and playthings can prove to be stimulating for young children to tell their story. Adults have to be careful though not to fill in influenced by their own prejudices.

If the subject of a conversation is painful for the child and for the adult, the tension will build up and children will try to end the conversation whereas adults will often try to change the direction of the conversation. Very young children stand up and leave the room when they have had enough. This is especially true when the conversation is initiated by adults and that it is mainly the adult who is motivated for the conversation. A painful subject evokes stress and children have very sophisticated ways in stress management.

John, five years old, was playing with an adult who wanted to talk about a difficult subject. John refused by saying that he didn't want to speak about it now. The adult made clear that she couldn't concentrate on the play because the subject didn't leave her mind. Well, that's no problem, said John. Think 'table' and it will help. That is what I always do: table, table, table...

Children try to concentrate on nice subjects in order to forget the nasty ones and they often succeed much better than adults. When a adult wants to speak with a child about a difficult subject, he should realise that the child has its own ways of handling stress. Young children have not often experienced that speaking up can make a significant change. They have had the experience that diverting themselves and enjoy playing, works fine. So they have to be motivated by explaining the benefits of talking instead of concentrating on agreeable subjects. That means that there should be a real benefit if you want to really motivate a child to talk about a subject that is painful to him.

### **Organizations listening to children**

Well this was the first part of my lecture. This first part probably made clear that in order to listen to children we have to prefer the one-to-one situation. This does not mean that organizations can only listen to children by having their workers listen to them. Of course, the first thing to do would be to train the workers in listening skills. But there are other ways through which organizations can listen to children and enable them to speak up. First of all, organisations can

establish the rule that in important subjects concerning children, they should be enabled to tell their side of the story.

When a telephone number was brought into reach of children as a means to talk about their problems, to ask questions about subjects that were on their minds and to tell about abuse and neglect, very soon this number was used by children to report abuse. The reason for this is, among others, that it was clear to them that the telephone number was only to suit them on their conditions. The telephone, moreover, is the very communication instrument of adolescents as all parents with adolescents will know by their telephone bills.

Education about difficult subjects helps children to tell about their own experience. When children hear about sexual abuse at school, some children dare to come and tell their story.

Sex education is a good example of the necessity of a realistic and honest information. What measures do we take to prevent sexual abuse by paedophiles? Megan's law in America shows a typical adult solution: let the adults know where sexual delinquents live and then children can be protected. Monitoring sexual delinquents is the typical solution adults think of. The discussion in the media is mainly about how adults can protect children while keeping them ignorant. I seldom hear about giving the children knowledge how to prevent abuse. When adults help children preventing sexual abuse, they always talk about teaching the child to say NO. Well, that is not the point, saying NO is something children are very good at! The problem is not that children can't say NO, the problem is that they are too confused to do so. When a child is physically abused, it knows deep inside: this is not fair. It hurts and the child knows it should not undergo the abuse. With sexual abuse the situation is totally different. Sexuality is a subject adults seem very positive about, so it is much more difficult for the child to stand up and confront the abuser. Furthermore the sexual abuse is often introduced by seemingly tender actions. The child is confused how to interpret the behaviour of the abuser.

We are probably born with a feeler for sexuality (Delfos, in press-b). You can feel an arm around you and feel there is a sexual connotation that you like or dislike and you can have an arm around you without any sexual connotation. Some years from now, we will probably learn that we know this by scent. For the moment it is enough to know that children know. They tell us about 'the strange things father did', and we know immediately they are talking about sexual abuse. Children feel there is something wrong, and even before being able to explain this in words, they know this is sexual. This is not an amazing idea. From an evolutionary and biological point of view it is logical that the human being should be born with a feeler for sexuality.

What we have to teach children is to trust their feelings, that if they feel it's wrong: it's wrong, and that they can protest, say NO or simply turn their back and go away. If you research the way sexual abusers proceed, you will see that most of them 'pick their victim'. They feel the subject is not very assertive and will not easily face up to a confusing situation. The abuser knows that it is enough to confuse the child.

Teaching children that some people have a the strange need to have sex with children, and that the child has the right to withdraw from such a situation without having to justify itself, is a truly preventive measure and will foster an attitude of talking about their experiences.

How can we help the child? Not by saying not to talk to strangers, this means practically the whole world and is not necessary at all! We can protect the child and prevent sexual abuse by



empowering the child by giving it realistic knowledge. As sexuality is a painful subject in everybody's life, organizations can help transcend the individual embarrassment and help parents help their children.

There are so many other possibilities for organizations to listen to children and to help them be heard. Children that are already alphabetised can be reached with a medium that is suited to them: the computer and especially the internet. Children talk freely on the internet. Children respond to survey research in a pretty accurate way and with a lot of joy if we work with computers, as research made clear (Borgers, De Leeuw & Hox, 1999). Children are very at ease with the computer and the pace of the computer matches their inner pace that has been terrible enhanced by television in the past decades. If we know how to construct computer conversations with children, we will probably gain an enormous amount of important material. And even if children cannot read or write, the computer offers once more the possibility to communicate. Children know how to handle the television, video and computer long before they know how to read or write. The use of icons or drawings makes communication possible before it can be put into words. Remember the ingenious experiment where a baby was offered a rubber teat that was connected to a video. Very soon the newborn baby understood that sucking wildly (Salinger & De Casper, 1993) produced the mother's voice and a slow sucking pace was connected to another sound. A similar experiment showed that children act the same way when their sucking produces the blurred image of their mother to become more sharp. When the mother was no longer visible the pace slowed down immediately. The child could handle the video long before he was able to tell what he saw and what went on in his mind.

Let me summarize with some practical tips. It is of the utmost importance to adopt an attitude of respect towards the child: the most powerful weapon in empowering the child is adult modesty. When talking with children, one should be aware of the expertise of the child. A conversation with a child should be a two-way communication effort and the child should be considered as a companion in helping. As the child is used that adult fill in the gaps and helps them formulate, the child should know what you expect, certainly if the conversation is not very common situation for the child, the child should be told what you expect of him or her. If you want to really communicate, you should be attentive to the child's own story. As children are very vulnerable and cannot easily stand up you should be honest to a child and clear about your intentions. The young child knows little about the rules of conversing so you have to tell the child you need feedback about what is happening in its mind. Depending on age, playing and conversing should be alternated. Especially with children you should value the non-verbal side of conversations and not be afraid to draw instead of talk and explaining with toys instead of words. Young children need to know if what they do is good, and being rewarded will motivate the child and tell him he is performing well. Another way of motivating the child (just as with adults) is by listening to its own story and not only to the story the adult wants him or her to talk about. In order to have a respectful and correct conversation you should avoid suggestive and misleading questions. Finally, as they pay more attention to the outline and less to events, it is necessary to stimulate children to tell the outline of an event and go on asking open questions about details and not the other way around. Likewise it is wise to ask young children about spacial details and less temporal details, you should ask 'where were you when that took place'

rather than 'when did this take place'.

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