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PARENTING

Show Your Understanding

How to connect with your child's emotional life

A fifth grade girl is very anxious about a math test she is taking the next day and approaches her mother that evening to discuss it. Mother and daughter enter a conversation in which mother tries to bully her out of the fears and make the girl think positively. But never does the mother communicate to her daughter that she understands her fears about the test. As a result, the daughter still feels perturbed and unconfident. Why? There has been no feedback between the parent and child, according to child psychologist Dr. F. Dodson in his book *How to Discipline with Love*. He describes feedback as: 1) Listening carefully to what your child is saying, 2) Formulating in your mind what your child is expressing, 3) Feeding back to her in your own words the feelings she has just expressed.

Here is how Dr. Dodson advises to hold a feedback conversation in the above situation: Devi: "Mother, can I talk over something with you? We've got a math test tomorrow, and I'm scared I'm going to flunk it." Mother: "Can you tell me more why you're so afraid about failing?" Devi: "Well, I know I've gotten pretty good grades on my math tests before, but this is different. It's called modern math, and we have to do fractions in ways I've never done." Mother: "This test scares

you because it's different from anything before. It's modern math and you have to do fractions in completely new ways, and it's frightening." Devi: "It sure is. I read some of these paragraphs three or four times that tell how to do it, and I still don't understand." Mother: "It's awfully scary when you read how to do it a couple of times and still don't get it." Devi: "It sure is! Could you help me with the really tough parts? If I could understand the principles of how to do it, I think I'd be all right." Mother: "What really upsets you is not being able to understand the principles; is that right?" Devi: "That's it." Mother: "Yes, I'll be glad to help. I didn't have modern math when in school at your age, so I may have trouble understanding the principles at first, too. But between the two of us I think we can figure it out." Devi: "Thanks, Mom, you really do understand how I feel."

Dr. Dodson comments on this example: "Mother does not jump in with superficial reassurance or advice. She takes [Devi's] feelings of fear seriously, does not belittle them, and by feeding them back to her lets her know that she genuinely understands how she feels. By doing this she is able to uncover the reason this particular test is scaring Devi--the unfamiliar modern math and her difficulty in understanding the principles involved. Once she uncovers this, she is able to respond to [Devi's] request for help in understanding these new, difficult principles."

Dr. Dodson advises, "When using the feedback technique, you will typically begin sentences with: "You feel" or "You feel angry" or "I'm hearing you say..." With the feedback technique, you do not ask your child why she feels a certain way; you simply accept the fact that she does. You do not bring in your

feelings; you stay with hers. You speak only in reply to her; that is, when she expresses a feeling, you feed it back. When she is silent and is not expressing a feeling, you are silent." This and many more loving techniques forge lasting bonds between parents and children.

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