

Critical Input from Young People

The information contained in our series of booklets was compiled as a direct result of several years of informal research, with input from more than 600 young people worldwide. Young people played an integral role in the creation and editing of these booklets.

What to Keep in Mind When Reading this Booklet

The most important idea to keep in mind while using this booklet series is that the key role of adults is to assist and support young people. Young people are inherently intelligent, cooperative and caring. When they are given space and encouragement, they will flourish. Many adults have put great effort into learning how to assist young people. These are some guidelines that have been used effectively.

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Listening to Young People

Having someone sincerely and skillfully listen to us about the struggles and joys of our lives can have a huge impact on how we feel about ourselves and how we function in the world. When was the last time someone just listened to you think out loud for a while without interrupting?

An adult can begin to break down barriers by learning to listen well to young people. Listening can also be used to help young people build relationships with each other.

There are three ways to use listening in your work with young people. One way, which we can call *on-the-spot listening*, is to listen to the young people around you in your everyday interactions. A second way, in *listening appointments*, is to set up specific times where listening is the only activity. *Special time*, finally, combines individual listening with a fun activity.

Guidelines for Listening

Listening is different than normal conversation. We are not looking for what we want to know, or asking questions or giving opinions on the topics that are interesting to us. Rather, we are setting up a space where young people get a chance to talk about their own thoughts and experiences *in a way that is useful for them*. These are general guidelines for using listening:

- Give full attention to the young person who is speaking. Do not interrupt. This is harder to do than you think. Try not saying anything for a while. See what happens.

- Remember that the person you're listening to is a wonderful, capable person who is already functioning beautifully. This is true even if you see her struggling with many areas of her life.

- Do not offer advice. Advice may serve a purpose later on, but not during listening time.

- Try not to direct the subject matter. When you're listening well, the young person will quickly bring up the issues that she needs to sort out for herself.

- Actively appreciate and encourage young people for every small success they've been able to achieve.

- Remember that your listening, along with your respect and caring, is significant and important in young people's lives.

- Keep strict confidentiality. Do not repeat or refer to what a young person has said in social situations or in conversation with others.

- When given delighted, thoughtful attention, people will often cry from sadness, laugh from embarrassment or sweat or shake from fear. Encourage this. We often get confused and think that if we can stop the person from feeling the hard feelings, we will stop the hurting. Feeling the feelings is part of naturally healing from the hurt. It will instinctively occur when there is enough safety.

Good listening takes practice. Keep setting up situations where you are specifically just listening to someone without interrupting. It may be awkward at first, but you'll learn to be good at it.



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On-the-Spot Listening

Our lives get very busy. Even five minutes, however, can be long enough to check in on a personal level with the young people around you. “How are you?” “How are things with that friend you were telling me about?” “Looks like things are a little rough right now.” If they say that they don’t want to talk right then, let them know that they can anytime. Keep asking. Most young people are not used to adults’ asking about their lives and honestly being interested.

Notice young people (and other adults) around you. Notice how they interact with people, and how they seem to feel about themselves, how they carry their bodies. Notice when they are acting differently, and when they seem to need to be listened to. Sometimes it will be obvious. They may be withdrawn from the group, or may bounce off the walls or look for a fight.

We need to check in with the people who look like they’re doing fine all the time, too. Listening is not just when there are problems, but also to let people know we care. Just this little bit of personal contact, with your noticing them and what’s going on in their lives, will make a bigger difference than you know. Remember when your first-grade teacher took just two minutes and told you what a great painting you had done, or the uncle that would come to visit once a year and play with you while the other adults sat in another room? All of us have memories of adults taking time to let us know we were special in some way, or asking for our thinking on something and really listening, or playing *our* games with us.



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Listening appointments are specific times that you set aside to get together with a young person, and listen to her on a more in-depth level. It can be anywhere from a half-hour to two hours. It adds safety to decide together on a specific amount of time at the beginning. Carefully listen to the young person talk about whatever she chooses. If you’ve got specific issues that you know she’s dealing with, it’s okay to bring those up, but from there, let her talk. This listening time is different than our usual conversations, where people bounce ideas off each other and discuss a topic back and forth. Here, it is for them to talk and for you to listen. In situations where it is professionally appropriate with young people or other allies to young people you can make listening appointments where you *take turns* listening. (See “Listening Formats” section.)

Choose a time when there will be no interruptions, don’t answer the phone and ask other people not to interrupt you. You want to show your friend that this time is the most important thing, and that the “adult world” isn’t going to get in the way of that. Every young person needs opportunities to be a priority in our lives. This helps her to trust her own thinking. If you can listen to a young person and help her think without directing the conversation or giving advice, she will arrive at possible solutions and directions for her life. We can all remember times when adults told us “Don’t go out with that guy—he’s trouble,” or “If you do badly in school, you’ll be sorry later.” You probably also remember doing what you wanted to do most of the time anyway. While the advice you got may have been good, young people need to come up with their own solutions.

Listening Appointments



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Special Time

Likewise, you don't know the answer to that young person's problems, even though you may have some insights. She won't be able to change things until the thinking becomes her own. The exception to this is when the young person is in an unsafe situation. Then listening is not enough, and you will need to help her get out of the dangerous situation.¹

Combining listening with one-on-one fun time works very well. This is an important way adults can spend time with a young person called special time.² Here the young person is in charge. Spending time like this will strengthen your relationship with a particular young person and build their trust that you are on their side and willing to follow their lead and do what they want to do, even for just a short amount of time each week. It will also increase young people's self-confidence by having someone care and show interest in their lives. Young people will have greater confidence that they can figure out how to get an adult's attention in the way that works best for them. Reserving this special time will feel difficult to do. As adults our lives are often set up so that we have limited time. But spending time this way will have a big positive impact on your relationship with a young person.

By following some specific guidelines, adults can better focus on a young person when doing special time listening.

¹ For more information on intervention, refer to the booklet *Tips from Young People on Good Youth/Adult Relationships*.

² For more information on special time, refer to the booklet *Special Time* by Patty Wipfler, Parents Leadership Institute, Palo Alto, CA.

First, set it up for a specific amount of time, with a clear beginning and end, and do not allow any interruptions.

Second, put aside the cares of the day, your daily chores, and other distractions that will draw your attention away from the young person.

Third, during this time let the young person choose what you are going to do together. It will be tempting to direct the activities so you feel comfortable, like going to the movies or for ice cream instead of basketball or a mud fight. Try not to do that. This is one hour a week where the young person gets to reverse the power dynamic. By doing this, you are giving young people a unique experience that will change their perspective on the world. Plan to do a fun activity together, keeping in mind that part of your purpose is to loosen things up and build trust so they can talk more easily. You can move this into listening appointments, or have them be interchangeable.

Fourth, let the young person know you love spending time with her using displays of affection and both verbal and visual clues to show how important they are to you.

Fifth, give the young person enough space to be herself and show things about her. By not assuming specific things will happen at this time together, you leave room open for new things to happen.

And last, use this opportunity to have young people learn how to use their own judgement by exploring ideas that they want. As adults, we are often tempted to use time with young people as learning opportunities. Look at this as time the young person can decide what they want you to learn from them!



This gives people a chance to be listened to and focus some on their personal lives, which will in turn give them more attention to focus on the meeting.

Additional Listening Formats

Meeting Openings: Pairings. Start each meeting with pairings. Choose a specific amount of time and split it evenly between the two people (maybe five or seven minutes per person). One person talks while the other person listens actively and with interest. The timekeeper announces when it's time to switch, and people reverse roles. You can ask a question like "Name something that is new and good in your life" or share a personal story of some kind. This gives people a chance to be listened to and focus some on their personal lives, which will in turn give them more attention to focus on the meeting.

Resource Groups. These are specifically set up around listening and taking turns talking. Divide the time equally among group members. The group can meet every week or once per month—whatever makes sense. Set aside a lunch hour or an evening. Each participant gets a set amount of time to talk and think and get out frustrations and share successes with group attention. When one person's time is up, you move on to the next person. Groups work best with five to eight members.³

Ongoing Partnerships. Pairs meet approximately once a week outside of group time for one to two hours. Follow the same format as the short pairings above. This is a regular opportunity for allies to get a longer period of time to practice listening and have a space to talk without interruption.

³ For more information about resource groups, refer to the booklet *Leading a Youth Worker Resource Group*.