An out of the ordinary parenting book which combines practical know-how with deep psychological knowledge. Writing with a deceptive lightness of touch, Caroline Penney helps us to understand the reasons why both parents and children behave as they do. A very welcome book.

Dr Sue Gerhardt, author of *Why Love Matters*

*Surviving family life is a big challenge, yet good-enough parenting can go a long way to refuting poet Philip Larkin's infamous claim that mum and dad 'f*** up' their children. This splendid new book will greatly assist parents in negotiating the parenting minefield successfully, helping them to raise emotionally balanced, happy children.*

Oliver James, psychologist, psychotherapist and writer

The Parenting Toolkit *is a comprehensive guide to parenting from a developmental perspective. Penney uses her many years of experience working with children and families to address the multifaceted tasks that face parents of children and adolescents. The author appreciates that the central fact about children is that they are growing, physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. Her discussions of healthy practices for children and youth are buttressed by research and many anecdotes from her own clinical practice. Parents will find this a handy, and helpful, guide to read as a whole, or to return to when dealing with any of the parenting issues discussed in the book. It is an essential manual for parents of children at all age levels.*

David Elkind, Ph.D. Professor Emeritus of Child Development, Tufts University

A small book, large in ideas, themes, and strategies to facilitate both the parent–child relationship and also the child's integrated development. A tool-kit well stocked with examples, exercises, and stories, likely to be of great value for parents in mobilizing their creativity, confidence, reflective functioning, and continuing engagement with their child over the peaks and valleys of family life.

Dr Dan Hughes, Psychologist and Founder of Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP)

An interesting and informative book, filled with practical life examples, giving easy pictures of how to engage with our children without stress. There are many exercises for managing behaviour, listening to our children, stress management (of our and our children's lives) and general parenting hints and tips. The examples of how we adults can work on our own behaviours and responses in order to support our children are very practical. There are also ideas for working with our friends, setting up family support groups, and listening to children, amongst others. An appendix contains some very interesting information on the theories that underpin parenting. Throughout, beautiful illustrations embellish the chapters and examples, making a delightful addition to the book.

Janni Nicol, Early Childhood Executive Officer, Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, UK

Hardware and DIY shops are among my favorite places to hang out. While I might not understand what to do with some of the items, I am grateful for the multiplicity of tools available for the variety of things needing to be repaired or re-built. This mirrors the relief that will be experienced by parents and educators when they read Caroline Penney's The Parenting Toolkit. *There is no one-size-fits-all approach to raising happy children, to self-care, to discipline, parenting styles, or stress management.*

Brilliantly, Penney offers a variety of strategies to bring to each of these topics and more. One does not need to agree with every strategy as there are others from which to choose that can bring about healthy and joyful results. She also reminds us that we need to take into account the ages and stages of development of the children. What works for a ten-year-old is not the approach to take with a young child or a teenager. Her many years as a family therapist and parenting expert, as well as her own experiences as a parent and grandparent, offer depth and authenticity to this practical and warm-hearted manual. Add this to your parent library now.

Cynthia Aldinger, author of *Life Is the Curriculum* and *Home Away From Home*

Modernity has heralded the loss of much intuitive wisdom about good-enough parenting – further exacerbated by a general crisis of stability and continuity in the modern family. Caroline Penney's expert distillation of decades of clinical experience will greatly empower parents; and as a template for helping children to thrive, this book could hardly be bettered.

Richard House Ph.D. chartered psychologist, childhood campaigner, editor of *Too Much, Too Soon?*

The Parenting Toolkit *is practical and easy to use, and packed full of useful ideas for new and experienced parents. The Toolkit sparkles with the author's joyful experience of children, parents and family life and her understanding of the demands and difficulties involved. I thoroughly recommend it.*

Dr Crispin Day, Psychologist and Head of Centre for Parent and Child Support,
South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

Caroline Penney's years of experience with parents shine through this wonderful book. Inspired by her early experience of Parent Network, she has built on this with tried and tested ideas from family therapy, all brought to life with vivid examples and stories.

Doro Marden, former Parent Network Chair and author of *Raise Happy Children: Teach Yourself*

The Parenting Toolkit

simple steps to happy & confident children

Hawthorn Press

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simple steps to happy & confident children

Caroline Penney

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Contents

Dedication

In loving memory of my parents Tony and Annette Freud who would have shared my pleasure in the publication of this book.

To Robert, Jessica and Nicholas who are my best teachers in how to be a parent and for all the love and joy you bring to my life.

To Lawrence for your wisdom and support.

Foreword

The very best parent I know had a terrible childhood. Her family was violent, desperately poor, and chaotic. Too many children, too little time and space. Kids fixed their own meals half the time, and they often woke to find strangers asleep in their living room or wandering down the hallway. It wasn't that her parents didn't care; they were just totally out of their depth. It was like being children raised by children.

Somehow, I don't know how, she managed to figure out all the things wrong with her childhood, and made sure that her own children had the opposite – stability, affection, fun, and discipline that was friendly and never scary.

You don't have to have a good childhood to be able to parent well. But you do need the chance to reflect, think and get in touch with what it felt like to be a child, and what might make things better.

There are an awful lot of books on raising kids, and a million self-proclaimed experts on the internet, with cheery lists of tips and points to make your child resilient, successful, confident, and so on. I am sure this is worthy stuff, but it makes me want to get my kayak out and sail right away. A snowstorm of advice is not what parents need.

Caroline's book is deeper water than this. It uses the secrets that family therapists know to get underneath problems and unlock what is causing them. Are you neglecting self-care? Are there emotional areas that press your buttons and make it hard to stay calm? Was your childhood a nightmare that seems to come back and haunt you and mess up your life even now?

In clear, simple and friendly language, she helps you understand and overcome these hurdles. She tells you the kind of stories I love to hear – the ones about families in much worse trouble than you, or at least as bad, and how they untangled things and went on to have happier lives.

There are ways to think about what you do and say to kids which are better than what was done and said to us when we were growing up. It's not mysterious or hard. If you can change the wheel on a car, or find your way around Netflix, or make pancakes on a Saturday morning, you can learn to communicate with kids.

I would recommend taking this book in small bits. Try some of it out, and see if it makes a

difference. You've got all the time in the world, as your kids will keep giving you new chances to improve!

Most people are good at some parts of being a mum or dad, but have holes in their abilities. Some aspects of parenthood just seem to go wrong, or blow up in our faces. You will naturally notice chapter titles that grab your attention, because you know, at some level, what you need to be more able to relax and be more connected with yourself and your kids. The whole human race is on this journey of healing and learning.

It took generations to get this messed up, and if we can shine even a bit of light into ourselves and grow a bit warmer and clearer, we can be very proud. Enjoy this book. Enjoy parenthood. That's why we do it, and why it can feel so good when we get it right.

Steve Biddulph
Tasmania, 2018

Introduction

Many parents tell me that they wish that they'd been given an instruction manual when they had a baby. Many of us felt completely unprepared at first for parenthood, feeling that we had to 'make it up as we went along'. *The Parenting Toolkit* is that manual we all wish we'd had.

Raising a child is one the most important and complicated activities anyone will ever do. This book gives you 12 basic parenting principles to help get it right. These principles help to improve the relationship between you and your child, provide strategies for dealing with challenging times and behaviour, and help your parenting to become more satisfying, fun and rewarding. They will help all your family to get along better, and increase the confidence and self-esteem of your children.

The Parenting Toolkit is based on how I have helped hundreds of families in my professional and clinical practice as a family therapist, on the latest research in the area, and – very importantly – on my own experience as the mother of three children. It is about becoming a reflective parent instead of just reacting to situations as they happen. It is about making the often small changes in how you relate to your child that can result in dramatic transformations in your family life.

How to use this book

I would recommend that you first read the book straight through, which will give you a full understanding of the whole Parenting Toolkit. Then you could spend more time going over each chapter and doing the associated exercises. Each chapter builds on the understanding from the previous one.

However, if you are short of time, you may wish just to look at one aspect of parenting that interests you, such as child-led play or the meaning of children's behaviour – in which case you can jump to those chapters. As your children grow and develop, the chapter on ages and stages will be fascinating, and the chapter on discipline strategies would be useful if you feel you need to update your knowledge on effective discipline methods.

If you work with parents you may like to investigate the appendix on the theories that underpin parenting education.

The book can also be used as a reference book, to dip into and out of when you are uncertain how to handle a specific issue, and the examples illustrating problems can show how making small adjustments to your parenting can achieve transformational results.

With a pencil in hand it could also be used as a work book in which you can learn about your child, and perhaps about yourself.

The book covers the following topics:

1. **Looking after yourself.** This chapter looks at the importance of getting your own needs met as a parent and not to feel guilty about this. It also looks at how patterns from previous generations can influence how we parent, arguing that these need to be understood so that we do not pass on unhelpful patterns of parenting.
2. **Feelings.** This chapter describes the importance of acknowledging feelings so children feel that their feelings are being taken seriously. It also helps parents understand how to express feelings in a way that can be heard and does not spoil relationships.
3. **Child-led play.** This chapter explains the reasons why play is important and how to implement child-led play so the child experiences high-quality special time with their parent(s).
4. **Parenting styles.** This chapter describes the main types of parenting style – Aggressive, Passive, Manipulative and Assertive – and their impact on children.
5. **Descriptive praise.** This chapter describes how to give specific praise which helps the child feel valued.
6. **Labels.** This chapter looks at the importance of not ascribing labels to children, but describing the behaviour instead. It also looks at roles in the family and the importance of letting children not be defined by a role – e.g. the 'sporty' one or the 'shy' one.
7. **Helping your child solve problems.** This chapter describes how a parent can help their child solve problems in a creative way.
8. **Understanding your child's behaviour.** This chapter explains that no behaviour occurs in a vacuum. There is always a need underlying the behaviour, and this behaviour is always communicating a meaning.
9. **Discipline strategies.** This chapter discusses and explains how to implement a wide range of discipline strategies.
10. **Ages and stages.** This chapter describes how the meaning of children's behaviour is dependent upon the developmental phase in which the child is located, and how, during each phase, a child needs to master particular tasks.
11. **Communication skills.** This chapter looks at how to listen and the common pitfalls that parents can fall into.
12. **Stress management.** This chapter looks at how to manage stress for both parents and children, providing case studies.

The first eight chapters and Chapter 11 will help build the positive relationship between parents and their children, improving their child's self-esteem and ability to be socially competent, and with the chapters building upon each other. Chapter 9 gives parents a range of different discipline strategies for helping their children accept boundaries and behave appropriately. Chapter 10 gives parents fascinating information about how child development impacts on expectations of children's behaviour, and the role of the parent in helping children successfully master the skills necessary to develop through each stage.

Chapter 12 is a guide to understanding stress and the how to cope with difficult feelings so that relationships are not damaged by destructive behaviour.

I have used the real life experiences of families I have worked with to tell stories about the impact of implementing different parenting strategies. The case studies are an amalgam of different family experiences, and all details have been anonymized.

Chapter 4

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles are important to reflect upon as we parent are children. This is because they deeply influence the quality of the relationships that we will develop with our children.

There are three main parenting styles:

1. aggressive
2. permissive
3. assertive

Most of us use a mixture of all three, with our style influenced by how we were parented ourselves. A parent may decide that they want to do everything differently to how they were brought up. When under stress, though, the way we were parented can come to dominate, even if we don't want it to. Consider how many times we think, 'I sound just like my father/mother'. Sometimes we have different parenting styles for different children, depending on their temperament, gender or position in the family. It's no surprise that this can cause conflict.

The Aggressive Parent Is Authoritarian

Aggressive parents use power, force and control to get children to behave in the way they want them to. They give a strong message of 'Do as you're told and don't question it'. Children may feel fearful of them. Such a parent will want all decisions to go their way. Children are not encouraged to have their own opinions, but to do as they're told without thinking. Children of these parents may not have much idea of how to take responsibility for themselves.

When children are young, this may produce very 'good' obedient behaviour, but as they become teenagers they will want more independence. Problems may then emerge in the relationships. There are two types of response that a child or teenager might make to an aggressive parent:

- **The children or teenagers could become rebels and fight their parents by disobeying them. They might feel unloved and furious. They may also become hardened, say they hate their parent, and pretend not to care.**

- **Some children or teenagers will retreat, give up, and withdraw into themselves, just submitting to whatever their parent suggests. They learn to give in straight away at any sign of conflict, and will tend to have very low self-esteem. For their adult life this could cause problems, as they will not feel able to ask directly for their needs to be met.**

James and Erica's Story

James and Erica came to see me because their 15 year-old son was saying he would prefer to live in a ditch rather than ever be in the same house as his father.

Erica was devastated because she was caught in the middle between her husband and son fighting – loving them both but feeling hopeless in the face of all this hatred. James felt that their son Tom 'was getting away with murder', treating the house like a hotel, not doing his school work properly, and not sharing in family time with his younger sister but disappearing into his room.

James had a very strict upbringing and left home at 16 to join the army. In two family therapy sessions we explored James's experiences of being fathered and how parenting styles needed to change as children grow up. I was able to tell James that Tom's rebellious behavior was similar to James's experience of growing up, that Tom was being 'a chip off the old block', and that he was growing up to be an independent young man. James later told me that this enabled him to feel that he was not 'giving in' or letting Tom walk all over him if he did start doing some negotiation. This enabled James and his son to develop a new relationship based on a more assertive style of parenting, and not the authoritarian type that proved so ineffective with a strong-minded teenager.

Holly and Esme's Story

Holly was furious with her daughter Esme and ended up screaming at her all the time, especially when she tried to get her out of the house to go to school.

In my sessions with Holly we spent a lot of time practising and learning about communication styles. Holly started to develop a less confrontational style of communication and Esme's level of aggression then lessened considerably. Holly reported that Esme was much better behaved now, giving an example of when Esme hadn't wanted to go to school and was having a tantrum about leaving the house because her shoes were too tight. Holly was able to stay calm (Esme had worn those shoes comfortably for the last three months). She just said, 'It is so annoying when you feel your shoes are too tight', whereas normally she would have said, 'Stop being so difficult and selfish, you are making us all late', which would have made the situation worse.

The Permissive Parenting Style Is Passive and Weak

They let children walk all over them and find it difficult to create boundaries. Parents with this approach can seem very loving and caring on the surface. However, because they are giving in all the time, the child will get more and more selfish, taking everything for granted, and unconsciously resenting their parents for not standing up for themselves. They will push the parents further and further to stand up for themselves.

These children will probably not be popular at school because they will not have learnt the important lessons of how to manage if you don't always get your own way. Parents who are very passive may sometimes explode when they feel they have been taken advantage of too much, losing their temper completely and then feeling guilty afterwards – making amends or giving in to their child – so that the cycle will repeat again and again.

Sometime parents who have had very aggressive parenting themselves say that they want to be completely different from their parents. They develop a permissive approach but then find that they're losing their temper all the time because they don't feel respected.

Petra and Sophia's Story

Petra was a lone parent with a seven year-old daughter she was finding impossible to control. She had experienced very aggressive parenting herself, often being beaten, and had vowed never to be like her parents. She had unwittingly developed a very permissive style of parenting. Sophia would not do anything she was told and just ignored Petra's requests, whether it was to go to bed now or to eat her dinner. Petra was at the end of her tether, and the relationship was not good for either of them. Petra was exhausted, she had no support from Sophia's father, her parents were estranged, and she had no network of friends around her. Her own self-esteem was low, so she found it very hard to set limits for Sophia because then she would have to withstand Sophia's anger.

I saw Petra for six sessions, and she began to see that she had to look after her own needs first so that she could parent Sophia. She started doing a few things for herself and managed to get a babysitter so she could go out one evening a week. We worked on how to do Special Time and to devise a list of household rules that she thought important enough to insist upon.

Petra then started doing Special Time with her daughter every day, but at the same time she also started to stand much firmer on her boundaries. Things slowly started to improve at home, and both Sophia and Petra became a lot happier. The quality of their relationship improved dramatically so that they enjoyed being in each other's company.

The Assertive Parent Knows when to Say 'No', which Creates Safe Boundaries for Their children

Assertive parents help their children solve problems and know how to listen to them. They are straightforward with their children, treat them with respect, and are respected themselves. These parents are fair and teach their children their own values and beliefs. Children with parents who are assertive will have better self-worth and an ability to relate well to other people because they respect their needs and feelings.

Other Parenting Styles

Manipulative Parenting Style

This type of parenting is passive-aggressive, using guilt and emotional blackmail to try to make the child comply – for example, 'Go to bed now, as I have an awful headache', or 'If it hadn't been for you, I could have been a famous singer, so don't make a fuss'.

Over-indulgent Parenting Style

Sometimes parents feel guilty if they have to work long hours or do not have the ideal home circumstances. They can then find it difficult to set boundaries so that their children learn to manipulate them by inducing guilt feelings in them. They may also throw money at their children – for example, buying presents or sweets because they want their child to like them, but not doing the hard work of spending time developing a relationship.

Over-protective Parenting Style

Parents may be over-protective because of issues from their own past. This means their children may become scared of the outside world, or go to the other extreme and start taking big risks because they've had little exposure to it.

Demanding Parenting Style

These parents are never happy with their children, believing they never work hard enough, achieve good-enough marks, or behave as the parents would like. These children could become very disheartened, give up and never feel that they're worthwhile. They could also become perfectionists but take no joy in their achievements.

Exercise

Think of the style you most often use in your parenting and the effect it has on your child or teenager. Draw a circle and make 'cake slices' in it to illustrate the proportion of different types of parenting style you use. Think about whether it differs for different children.

Parenting Styles: Key Points

There are three main types of parenting style as well as some subsidiary ones.
We all do a little of all of them, but it is helpful to be aware of what they all are and if we are tending too much to use an unhelpful parenting style.

- ★ Aggressive parenting leading to unhappy children who can become aggressive themselves, angry, rebellious, scared or shut down.
- ★ Permissive parenting leading to unhappy children who may feel uncared for, scared, too powerful, and who find it difficult to fit into friendship groups.
- ★ Assertive parenting leading to a happy child secure in their environment, able to meet their needs and express their feelings, and let other people also have their needs met.
- ★ Manipulative parenting that leads to confused unhappy children who have been on the receiving end of emotional blackmail, but are not quite able to work out how they feel.
- ★ Over-indulgent/guilty parenting leads to children who can become manipulative themselves as they can see their parents' weak spots.
- ★ Over-protective parenting can lead to children who are anxious and scared, or who may become risk-takers.
- ★ Demanding parenting can lead to children feeling they can never be good enough and wanting to give up trying.

Chapter 6

Labels

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the crippling effect that labels can have on children by stopping them developing their full potential. It then explains how parents can describe the behaviour instead of giving the child a label.

Labels can be like a self-fulfilling prophecy and stick with you throughout your life. If a child is told enough times that they're not bright, are just like their father (who was bad news), or will come to no good, this is often what happens.

Labels are very interesting for how they apply in families. A label can become a role. One child may have a label of 'the clever one', one 'the practical one', or 'the pretty one'. These labels can end up forcing a child into that role. The best way to try to change this is to deliberately do the opposite of what they might expect – for example, asking the child you think is untidy to help to sort out the kitchen cupboards, or asking the 'unreliable' child to fetch milk and bread from the local shop.

Some parents ask me what is so wrong with having a positive label such as 'helpful', for instance; but such a label could define a child who may not want to be helpful all the time, but sometimes want to be single-minded and finish their own project.

Labelling is related to our perceptions and filters towards our child. These play a crucial role in influencing how we see people. Perception and filters are the emotional attitudes towards our child which form the basis from which we view their behaviour. A simple example of when we're influenced in this way is if we are told something negative or positive about someone before we meet them. In my experience, this can completely or largely determine how I see the person at our first meeting. I need to meet them a few more times before I can form my own opinion without the effect of the information received before I met them.

Exercise

Think of one of your children and get a picture or a sense of him or her in your mind. Keep that picture constant, looking at it with the attitude of: 'My child is like a bottomless pit, demanding from me all the time.' Be aware of your feelings towards your child.

Keep the same picture in your mind and look at it with the attitude of, 'My child is difficult and intentionally naughty to upset me'. Be aware of your feelings again – have they changed?

Now imagine your child with the attitude of, 'My child is totally loveable'. How does this internal attitude change the way you feel about your child? Did the label affect how you saw them?

With some children who can sometimes be very difficult, it can be helpful to put pictures of your child being really gorgeous around your bedroom so that you have that internal memory of your child being really lovable.

Dagmar's Story

Dagmar came to see me because her 'devil child' would never do what he was told. By the age of six he'd already been expelled from three schools. He was violent and aggressive towards his little brother, to children at school, and also to his mother. His father saw him at weekends and mid-week and also said he was a 'devil child'. The child's reputation followed him wherever he went.

After an assessment, it was found that Dagmar's son had complex psychological difficulties. Once we'd set up a proper plan that included child psychotherapy, parenting classes for his parents as well as some couple work with both of them, they were able to parent him more appropriately. They understood the triggers for his aggressive behaviour and he was able to settle in to a very well-structured school and to thrive. He no longer had to live up to his label.

As parents, we sometimes label our child as naughty, clumsy, shy, and so on. These labels can 'stick', so describing the behaviour rather than the child is a more useful way of giving them the message that they can change. It prevents the child having a label hanging round their neck, limiting their potential.

The label 'naughty', which covers all sorts of behaviour, could be changed from 'you naughty child' to 'when you hit your brother it was unkind', or 'when you copied Karen's homework it didn't help you learning about fractions'.

The label 'clumsy' could be changed to 'You knocked over the jug when you rushed to get your plate'.

The label 'shy' could be changed to 'It takes you time to feel at ease with new people'.

Although it can feel awkward at first to describe the behaviour and not just give a label, it's much more helpful in the long term, as the child then has options about how to behave and is not constrained by their label.

Exercise

Think of a label you give your child and see if you can come up with a sentence that describes the behaviour instead.

Alistair's Story

Alistair had a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He needed help with planning his time. When his parents gave him a series of commands such as go upstairs, brush your teeth, wash your face, and get dressed, he would forget the third instruction by the time he'd brushed his teeth. His parents found his behaviour exhausting. They felt close to thinking he was being purposely disobedient. Alistair also had very low self-esteem. When I asked him what he was good at or what made him special, he couldn't think of a single thing.

During one of the family sessions, we spent time drawing a timeline to represent the different activities that Alistair had to do in the morning and evening. This greatly helped him to be able to organise himself. I then used strength cards in a session where he and his sister, brother and parents had to choose a card which depicted a strength to describe each other, such as kind, brave or enthusiastic. This session enabled Alistair to see that he did have strengths and to express his positive feelings towards the rest of his family. He started to see that he was unique and special. Alistair's parents were delighted by how he was now starting to manage his ADHD and become more confident.

If a child has a disability or they were very vulnerable as a baby, the parents can feel very protective of them, but this can then give rise to a secondary handicap. The child is being protected from the world and not allowed to experience success and failure, or how they can have an effect on their world. In these instances, the initial label (such as fragile, vulnerable or helpless) can cause more problems in the future.

Exercise

Take a moment to think back to when you were a child or teenager. Did your parents ever use terms to describe you such as 'naughty', 'bad', 'selfish', 'inconsiderate' or other negative labels? How did it feel to be labelled critically by your parents or by any other adult in your early life? What does it feels like now to be labelled critically by another adult, or even by your children?

Labelling: Key points

- ★ Labelling can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- ★ Labelling can develop into roles in children which are unhelpful, especially in a group of brothers and sisters.
- ★ Describing behaviour is much more helpful than labelling the child, as it separates the child from the behaviour.

Chapter 11

Communication

People build relationships by communication with each other. This chapter describes how to do this successfully and avoid the common pitfalls we so often fall into when trying to communicate with our children. For parents and children to be able to communicate honestly and openly with each other lays the foundation for healthy relationships. This can carry forward to the next generation, and is an enormous gift to give your children.

Communication is much more than just talking. We communicate more with our expression, touch, gestures, posture, tone and volume of voice than with the actual words we use. When we listen, we're not only hearing what the person is saying, we're also interpreting and understanding what their speech conveys. Listening skills can be divided into three clusters:

- Attending skills
- Following skills
- Reflecting skills

Attending Skills

Attending means giving someone your physical attention, with an engaged body posture and eye contact. When I teach listening skills in parenting classes, I'm always fascinated by the fact that the pairs doing a listening exercise will often mirror each other's position when listening to each other. I often ask people to stop what they're doing and just look round the room. The parents observe that most couples are unconsciously mirroring each other's body language. This body matching is a way of communicating acceptance and a willingness to help.

Eye contact is interesting because in some cultures, eye contact between a younger person and an adult is regarded as rude, and is not encouraged. It's important, therefore, to be aware of cultural differences when thinking about eye contact. Some adolescents don't like the pressure of feeling they have your full attention, so on a walk or car journey – when you can talk but it's not too intense as you're both looking ahead – can be a great time to get adolescents to speak with you.

Graham's Story

I was facilitating a 'Living with Teenagers' group where Graham was upset that he didn't seem able to communicate with his son. When he did the listening exercise with his partner, he closed his eyes, becoming very still and leaning back in the chair. His partner felt belittled because she felt that he wasn't listening to her. When challenged, Graham said he always closes his eyes and becomes still when listening to his son because then he can concentrate on what's being said. He hadn't realised that this was perceived by his son as being dismissive and uninterested.

When he put into practice the listening skills learned on the course during the following weeks, he was thrilled to report that he had been able to listen to his son's concerns about deciding which A-levels to do, and that his son had appreciated this.

When you're attending to your child, not paying attention to any distractions is very important. If your mobile phone is ringing all the time or you're looking at messages or the TV, a child will feel that their conversation isn't important and will stop talking with you.

Remember, we communicate far more with our bodies and the way we use our voices than with our words alone. Any words of acceptance will be meaningless to your child if your body is sending the message that you're too busy to be bothered with them right now.

It's also important to think about the other person when you're listening to them. You have to stop thinking about your shopping list or all the list of things you have to do later in the day. Both adults and children pick up very quickly if they're on the receiving end of 'fake listening', and it's very upsetting.

Exercise

This exercise has two sections, A and B.
A: In a pair, try to listen badly to your partner for two minutes, look up in the sky, do your shoe laces, look in your handbag, and so on. After this time ask your partner how it felt.

B: The second part of the exercise is for the listener to really listen – silently, saying nothing, and really concentrating on communicating acceptance and understanding while making best efforts to let the speaker know that they care about what they're saying.

The listener and the talker could then swap roles and repeat both A and B. The pair can then tell each other how it felt to be listened to and also just to listen. Did they feel they had to hold back? Did they give full attention and were they aware of the power of silence?

This exercise can be a real 'light-bulb moment' for parents as they see the importance of really listening, and how their partner will often open up and speak about what is concerning them after five minutes of listening. So many of the parents in parenting groups say that they've never experienced good listening before, and what a difference it makes to how they feel.

Following Skills

Many parents divert attention from what the child is saying by asking lots of questions to find out information to sort out the problem. The parent may feel that they're being helpful.

However, this doesn't help the child feel listened to, and they may feel overwhelmed, and won't ask for help again.

'Door-openers' act as a way of encouraging your child to talk, but in a way that's not intimidating. Use sentences like, 'You look as if you had a difficult day – do you want to talk about it?' ... I'm here if you want to talk ... If you want to talk later I'll be here'. Minimal encouragers such as 'Oh ... I see ... sure ... gosh' are also useful to show the child that you're listening to them.

Infrequent open questions can also be useful in keeping a conversation moving. The most important aspect of open questions is to leave the power with the child and not to try to direct them. Questions shouldn't be used by the parent to gather information so that they can come to the best solution and sort out the child's problems, because this doesn't demonstrate really listening to the child. It's an example of taking away control. Open questions help children to open up and share their feelings. Examples of open questions are, 'What happened? ... What was that like?'.

Closed or too-specific questions often only get a 'yes' or 'no' response, and completely control the direction of communication. Examples of closed questions are, 'Did you get into trouble again today? ... What did you do at school today?'. These easily lead to parents just asking one question after another, with the child saying, 'I don't know ... don't remember' in a monotone voice. Information is much more forthcoming in a more general conversation, including also telling your child about your day, for example.

Focused silence is important in helping children talk. Silence gives the child or teenager more time to go deeper into themselves and to experience their feelings. As a parent it can be difficult to have silences because of our own disquiet with this, and so parents will often ask questions or give advice in order not to experience this discomfort. If the parent can really attend to the young person's body posture and non-verbal communication, and think about what they may be feeling, then it's much easier to remain silent and focused on your child while they try to explore their thoughts or feelings.

Simon, Stacey and Susannah's Story

Stacey and Susannah were furious with their father Simon for separating from their mother and starting a new relationship. They hadn't forgiven him after five years, even though he was their main carer, as their mother had mental health issues. During the sessions it turned out that they were most upset because they felt he didn't listen to them. We worked on listening skills for all the family, and soon the relationships became much more constructive.

Exercise

In pairs, try to think about the sort of things that could get in the way of listening to your children. Practical matters like having a TV on, being distracted by a mobile phone, or other children making conflicting demands, could be the problem. We need to be aware, too, of our own internal feelings of not wanting to be upset, feel angry or get overwhelmed. Try to think what you could do differently to enable yourself to listen.

The partner in the pair can concentrate on acknowledging any worries or feelings expressed, and ask open-ended questions. These will help the speaker think about what they could do to change what they fear might happen. If you really feel that it's impossible to listen, it could be an excellent idea to try and get some counselling for yourself so that you feel heard and supported.

Reflecting Skills

Reflective listening helps to communicate understanding and acceptance. This can help the child gain insight and get to the core of the issue. In reflective listening you summarize in your own words what you've just heard, as well as the speaker's underlying feelings. The effect of reflective listening is to increase the speaker's self-esteem, to give a powerful message of acceptance, and to encourage the child to take responsibility and develop their own capacity to make decisions.

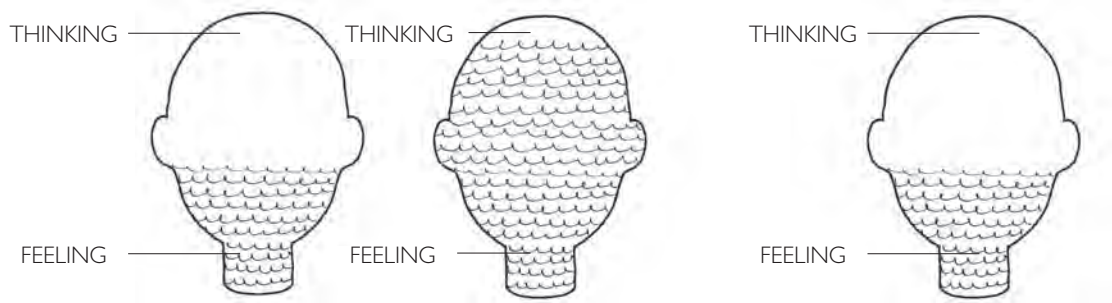
Reflective listening provides a feedback loop so the listener knows that they've listened correctly. When we listen to another person properly, there are four stages in the process. First, the speaker has the thought, then they put the thoughts into words, the words are heard by the listener, and are then interpreted by combining the words, context and non-verbal communication to give meaning to the communication. Reflective listening is a means of ensuring that the communication doesn't get lost in any of these four stages.

In many ways, problems are like onions with many layers, but with only the top one showing. Often the problem the child talks about is not the real one – for example, They might say 'I hate school', whereas the real problem could be, 'I find it difficult to make friends'. This is why children can sometimes remain upset after their parents think they've solved the problem (for example, by moving school) because this wasn't the underlying problem.

Reflective listening is an enormously useful skill when a child is emotionally upset. When a child is upset they can experience feelings of being completely flooded by emotion, unable to stop

these powerful feelings from causing damage – either by being violent or by saying hurtful things. When someone is upset in this way, it can take 20 minutes for the mind to calm down and be rational again.

The following diagram shows what happens in the brain when a child gets flooded with emotions.



An Emotionally Flooded Child's Brain

By acknowledging the feeling and reflective listening, you're able to bring the child down to a more balanced state.

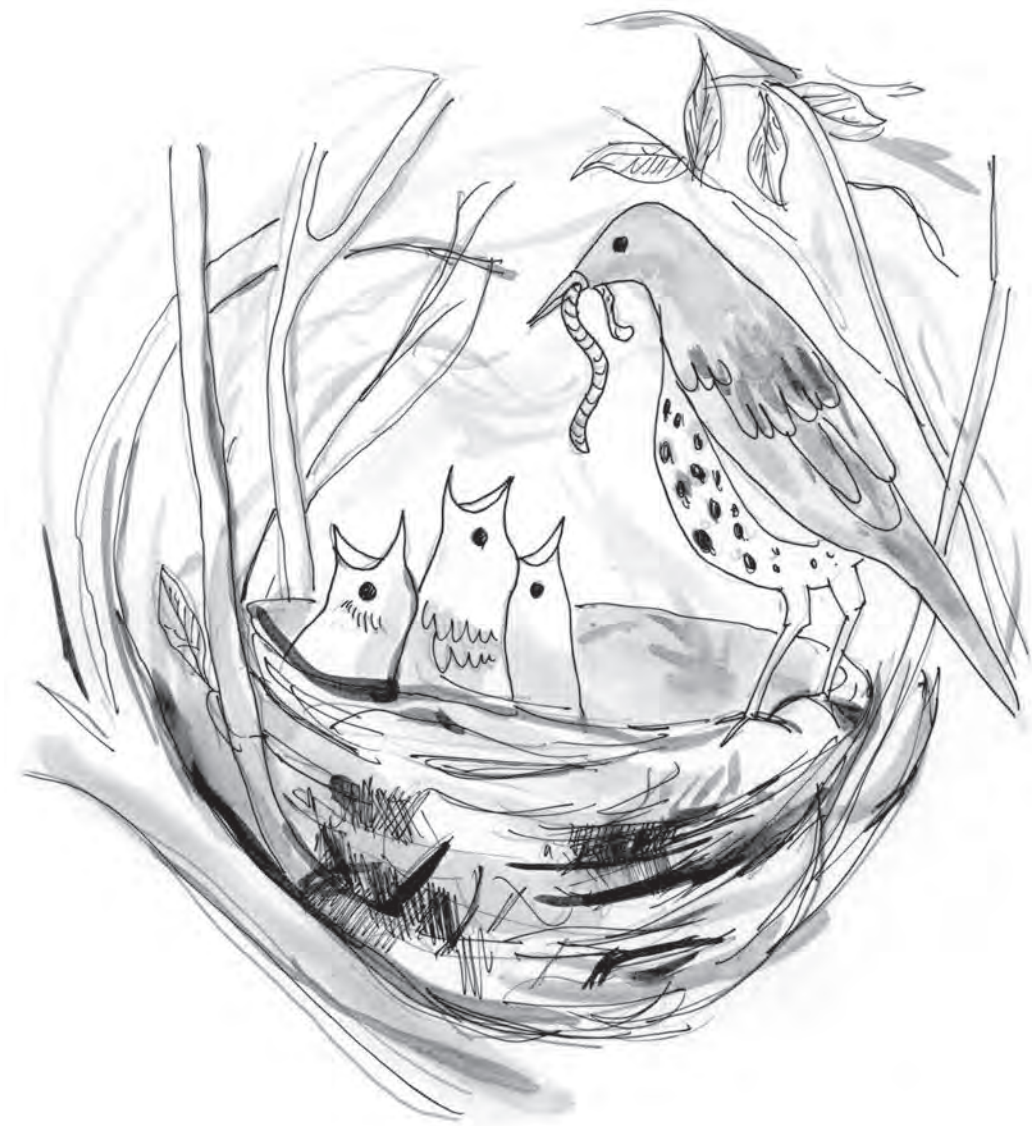
Hugh and Kim's Story

Hugh told me that his daughter, nine year-old Kim, had been very upset when her hamster was ill. She was crying when he came in to vacuum-clean her room. She told him that he didn't care that the hamster was ill, and would disturb it by making a noise with the vacuum-cleaner. Hugh got annoyed with Kim, saying that her room needed cleaning. She then asked when Mummy was coming home, to which he replied that she only wanted to complain to mummy to tell her that he was a bad father. This started a massive argument, ending with Kim in tears.

We tried to look at the incident from a new perspective to see what could have been done to avoid such a painful argument. Hugh realised that if he'd used reflective listening, saying things like, 'I know you must be feeling very worried about your hamster who means so much to you', 'You're worried that the noise of the vacuum cleaner could upset your hamster', or 'It's horrible when you feel so helpless to look after your hamster when he's not well'. These comments would have shown Kim that her father did care and was aware of her feelings. I'm sure if he had said any of these statements, he'd have been able to vacuum-clean, and the evening would have progressed without this massive argument.

When emotionally flooded, children become overwhelmed by their feelings. They need help to regain the ability to find their own solutions, while at the same time needing space to express their feelings. The best way to do this is to acknowledge the feelings and help them work them through. By having their emotions validated, children learn that these are natural, and that they can do something about them instead of letting them build up inside. Sometimes all that's required is to name the feeling you're picking up from your child – for example, 'I notice you're feeling cross, frustrated and so on'.

When talking to parents, I use an analogy of a mother bird digesting a worm and feeding it to her fledglings as being like a parent trying to find the right word for the emotion to feed back to their child, so that they can start to regulate their own feelings.



Exercise

Find a partner to practise reflective listening for five minutes and then change roles. Try to use a difficulty or problem you're actually struggling with, and see if you feel any different after five minutes. Think about whether it's difficult or easy to listen reflectively, and how you could develop this skill.

Michael and Tiffany's Story

Michael and Tiffany came to see me because their three children – aged 11 and a pair of seven year-old twins – were being violent to each other, and rude and aggressive to their parents. During the interview I realised that Michael and Tiffany didn't seem able to communicate with each other. They weren't able to listen or understand what their partner had said. I used a technique from couple therapy in which one member of the couple talks for five minutes while the partner just has to listen and reflect back what they've heard. They're not allowed to answer or come back with any questions or denials. This is to ensure that the speaker knows that the listener has really heard what they've said. After the five minutes is up, the roles are switched and the other partner speaks.

It became clear during this exercise that Michael and Tiffany had never been able to discuss a coherent way to parent their children, or to agree on any boundaries or rules, because they didn't want to listen to each other. By challenging the parents to do this, they were able to discuss some difficult issues, including the differences in their parenting styles, to try to come to a decision about how to parent their children. In due course, after numerous sessions they did come up with some boundaries and had learned the skills to enforce them. When the children saw that their parents were working together, their behaviour also became much more controllable.

Problems in Communications

Communication (both listening and talking) is complex. I often wonder how people manage to stay in any relationship, because it's so complex and very few people are taught to communicate successfully. I sometimes feel that in order to survive with a family, we all need an honours degree in emotional literacy and communication skills.

When we talk to someone, there are three different categories of unhelpful responses. These have been adapted from a book called *People Skills* by Robert Bolton (1986).

1. Judgemental Responses, Such as Criticising and Labelling

Parents often criticize their child because they think this will make them work harder, be kinder, and be more thorough. However, it often has the opposite effect, making the child downhearted. Other, more encouraging techniques described in this book actually prove more effective at changing behaviour.

Zac's Story

Zac was 15 and had given up studying. His parents criticized him all the time, saying he was playing too much on his computer, he wasn't revising enough, he didn't have the right type of friends. Both his parents had very harsh upbringings. They were trying so hard to make him successful that they didn't realise that these judgemental responses were destroying his sense of self-worth. Both Zac and his parents came to family therapy to help them to develop a positive relationship and to stop the communication patterns being so judgemental.

Taking control, by telling children what to do all the time, makes them resistant and resentful, and also destroys self-esteem. Some parents feel tempted to tell their children what they should or ought to do in every single situation. This increases the child's anxiety, and in the long run breeds rebellion. Giving advice all the time can also disempower the child. It's much better for them to make their own decisions, and advising may imply some contempt for the child's own abilities to sort out their own problems. Of course, if you're really asked for advice by your child, it's fine to offer it.

2. Avoiding the Child's Concerns Prevents Any Real Communication

Reassurance doesn't reassure because you're not really hearing the child. Thus when Angela says, 'I'm really stupid at reading', to say 'No, you're not, you can read some difficult books and the other girls in your class are all super bright', doesn't improve how Angela feels. It's far better to listen properly and try to appreciate what your child is saying and feeling – for example, by saying 'You're really worried about your reading, aren't you?'. By insisting that she's a good reader means she's not being heard or witnessed.

Jonas' Story

Jonas was scared at the idea of going to secondary school. He was having nightmares and he was behaving badly at home. He was refusing to do his chores and was barely doing his homework. His parents came to see me because they were concerned that their normally happy child seemed to have suddenly changed to become angry, defiant and tearful.

When we explored what was happening, Jonas explained clearly that he was nervous of going to a new secondary school as all his friends were going to a different school. His parents were at first dismissive of his concerns, saying the new school was excellent and he'd have lots of new opportunities there. He could take up a new instrument because it had an excellent orchestra. They told him not to be silly because he'd love the new school and make new friends quickly. Jonas remained sullen in the session and refused to speak.

After two individual sessions with Jonas I realised his concerns about the new school were very real, and he felt that his parents were being dismissive of them. In a review session with his parents Jonas explained his concerns and his parents then took them seriously and arranged for Jonas to visit the school three times, and they made contact with another family with a son going to the school. A play-date was arranged for the two boys and they enjoyed playing together. Jonas then became much happier as he felt his concerns had been properly listened to and that he was not just receiving empty reassurance.

3. Diverting or Distracting

These are classic ways of changing a conversation to a topic you want to talk about or feel more comfortable with, meaning the child isn't heard. Logical reasoning is another way of withdrawing from a difficult emotion – once again, the child won't feel heard or witnessed.

Elizabeth's Story

Mr and Mrs Taylor came to see me because they were worried their daughter Elizabeth aged 14 was becoming more and more reclusive.

They lived in the countryside in a small cottage, and Elizabeth found friendships difficult and didn't enjoy going to her secondary school. She felt like an outsider, and wasn't in any of the 'popular girl groups'. She spent a lot of time in her bedroom.

Both the Taylors had experienced a tough upbringing and had worked since they were 14 years of age. They had Elizabeth when they thought they could no longer have children, and saw her as a great blessing.

Elizabeth was desperate to have a dog as a companion but her father was adamant that it would be too expensive and time consuming to look after, which left Elizabeth feeling completely rejected, and so she withdrew more into herself. This in turn left her parents feeling furious and worried because they felt that she should act more 'grown up' and just accept their decision. They tried to get her interested in their local church youth club and the girl guides.

Elizabeth was not interested in either of these diversions.

I worked with Elizabeth for six weeks, and we devised a plan to try and persuade her parents to let her have a dog. (I gained the permission of her parents for this, as I didn't want to undermine them.) Elizabeth's mother was more accepting of the idea but felt she had to support her husband.

The plan involved making a power-point presentation in our sessions to persuade her parents that a dog would be a positive addition to the household.

She wrote down all the positives, and addressed her father's issues by saying she would pay for the dog by getting a job doing a paper round, and that she'd walk the dog before and after school. Elizabeth spent a lot of time researching the best breed of dog for them to welcome into the family.

On the review meeting, Elizabeth showed the power-point presentation to her parents, who started to see her point of view and were impressed by all the work she'd done. They decided to get a retired guide dog for the blind.

I saw Elizabeth and her family two months later and was delighted that the whole family were enjoying the dog, Elizabeth was much happier in school, and she'd found a friend who enjoyed walking dogs as well. Elizabeth was no longer having her wishes rejected, and had reconnected with a warm loving relationship with her parents again.

Communication: Key Points

- ★ Communication is more than just talking; much of our communication is non-verbal.
- ★ Listening skills can be divided into three categories: attending, following and reflecting.
- ★ Reflective listening means to reflect back the feeling and paraphrase the content.
- ★ The results of reflective listening are increased self-esteem, feeling accepted, and having a greater confidence in making your own decisions.
- ★ Problems in communication can be caused by responses which are either judgemental, assert control, or are not really listening to the child's concerns.