

## Empathy and Understanding Strengthen Children

Imagine that you have just done something dumb. Maybe you slammed your finger in a door or tripped on a curb. Does it help to have someone point out your error? Would you feel better and smarter if someone said, "You need to pay attention to where you are going!" Would you be glad if your spouse said, "Well, I guess we will need to hold classes for you on walking." No doubt you would feel insulted and angry. The same is true for children. When we state the obvious or emphasize ordinary mistakes, we insult people. This does not result in better performance; it results in damaged relationships. Our usual way of responding to our children's bad ideas and mistakes is to correct them. Haim Ginott, the famous child psychologist, has observed the following:

When a child is in the midst of strong emotions, he cannot listen to anyone. He cannot accept advice or consolation or constructive criticism. He wants us to understand him. He wants us to understand what is going on inside himself at that particular moment. (Ginott, 1965, p. 22)

**There is something very healing when people show understanding and compassion for our pain.** Maybe it is because understanding shows that we care enough to put ourselves in the other's shoes. Maybe it is also because understanding shows respect while advice may feel like criticism. After all, the answers to any problem are usually within the person with the problem, even when that person is a child.

Sometimes we assume that showing understanding will make children think we agree with their view or accept their misbehavior. But understanding really sends a very different message. It tells the child that we care about what happens to him or her: "Your situation is very painful. I feel bad for your pain. I know you want to do things right. I hope my support and love can help you find the peace that will help you solve the problem."

The person with the problems knows the situation, their feelings, their concern and their resources. The best way to help a person in pain is to provide understanding. When we provide understanding, the person is likely to find answers within him or herself.

**Understanding can be like a foreign language.** Most of us did not get very much understanding growing up; most of us are not used to speaking in that way either. Understanding involves observing the child and bringing our own human experience of pain to activate and inform our compassion. So, for instance, if a child tells us about being picked on at school, we might respond with something like one of the following:

"How frustrating."

"I wonder if you felt pretty lonely."

"You wished you had someone to stick up for you."

Many challenges in family life are not solved with understanding alone. We also need to set limits and do problem-solving. See additional units in this series for more information on these subjects. In the exercises that follow this unit there are examples of responses that are understanding and some that are not.

As you get better and better at showing compassionate understanding with your children, they will feel more loved and more confident in their ability to solve problems. And they will feel more love and trust with you.

### Applications:

Place yourself in the position of the person in the situation described in the top left of the box. Consider why the understanding responses are helpful while the less understanding responses might make you feel insulted. In the empty rows at the bottom of the table, you might add other things that you commonly hear (or say) and additional ways that might show understanding.