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SP488-B-Being Understanding

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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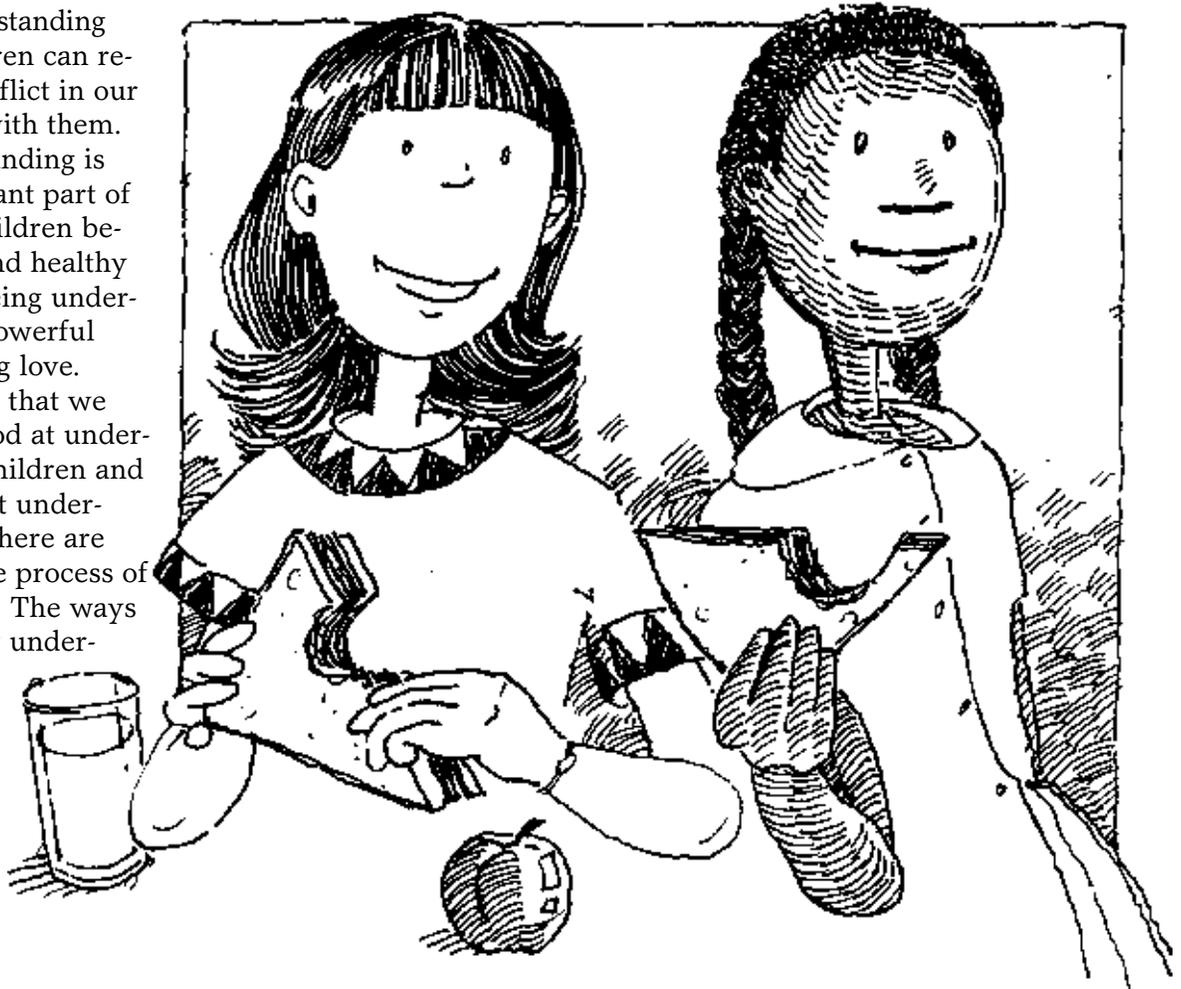
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PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children

Being understanding with our children can result in less conflict in our relationships with them. Being understanding is also an important part of helping our children become secure and healthy people. And being understanding is a powerful way of showing love. Most of us feel that we are already good at understanding our children and at showing that understanding. But there are surprises in the process of understanding. The ways we try to show understanding often don't work very well.



Ways NOT to show understanding

Many things we think show understanding actually have the opposite effect. They make a person feel mad or misunderstood. Following are some examples of things that we should avoid:

- **Don't give advice.**

"What you need to do is"

"If you would stop being such a baby you wouldn't have that trouble."

- **Don't talk about your own feelings and experiences instead of theirs.**

"I understand."

"That same thing happened to me."

"That's nothing. You should hear what happened to me."

"I know just how you feel."

- **Don't make the child's pain seem unimportant.**

"Everybody suffers. What makes you so special?"

"Why don't you grow up?"

"Stop that. You're driving me crazy."

When people feel bad, they feel that their pain is so bad that no one can really understand it. That's why a person who is hurting would probably rather have you say, "Your pain must be awful. I wish I could understand just how sad (or hurt or lonely) you feel." Sometimes the best way to show understanding is to admit that you can't understand just how bad a person feels.

How can I show understanding?

The key to understanding what the other person feels is identifying her feeling. After we have listened carefully (and watched carefully) to learn how a child is feeling and acting, we might do one of the following:

- **Acknowledge or identify the child's feeling.**

"You feel strongly about this!"

"You seem to feel very concerned (hurt, upset, confused)."

- **Invite more discussion.**

"I would like to understand how you are feeling. Will you tell me more?"

"Uh huh."

- **Understand that the person's pain is special for that person.**

"I wish I could understand better how you feel."

"Ouch. I don't know if I can even guess how terrible you feel."

- **Use active listening.**

"Let me see if I understand. You feel like . . . ?"

"It sounds like you feel lonely (confused, sad, etc.)."

How do I show understanding to a very young child?

When a child is very young, she doesn't understand a lot of talking. It is still possible (and very important) to be understanding with her. For example, when a baby cries, an understanding parent looks for a cause rather than blaming the child. The parent might check for hunger, a dirty diaper, discomfort, or loneliness. The understanding parent recognizes that a child cries because of a need. Parents can learn to be sensitive to those needs. Understanding starts long before children understand our words.

What is the message a child gets when we are understanding?

Think about how it feels to be understood. What are the messages we get when someone shows us understanding?

When someone takes the time to understand our feelings, it may cause us to feel loved and safe. A child who feels understood by us is more likely to trust us and feel close to us.

Feeling understood helps a child understand his own feelings, respect them, and deal with them. It may actually help the child find solutions to the problems.

Showing understanding to a child may be especially difficult for parents. We tend to think it's our job to correct and change our children. Consider the example of spilled milk.

When a child spills milk at the table, it's common for parents to become angry. Sometimes we give them lectures about being more careful. Sometimes we even call our children names like "clumsy" or "stupid." Lectures and name-calling are likely to make the child angry or hurt.

How can we show understanding when a child makes a mistake like spilling milk? One way is to simply say, "Oops. Will you get a towel and wipe up the spill, please?" By avoiding lectures and insults, we are showing respect for the child's feelings.

Insulting lectures don't help children do better next time they have milk. They may even make the child more nervous and more likely to spill it.

Another message of understanding is: "It's easy to spill a glass of milk. All of us do it some time. Please get a towel and wipe up the spill." Children need to know they can make mistakes and still be loved and accepted.

Sometimes it's hard to show understanding because we feel angry when the child makes a mistake. When we're afraid we might say something mean, we are wise to be quiet until we feel less anger.

How can I show understanding and still discipline my child?

Sometimes it's hard to deal with our children because we're angry or tired or lonely. We don't have any love to give our children. If that is true, we need to find ways to strengthen ourselves. We may need to have time with our friends or time for our hobbies. It's hard to give love when we feel empty. (See Extension SP487-B in this series, "Taking Care Of The Parent: Replacing Stress With Peace.")

Take time to listen to children's feelings. Understand. Remember that what the child is experiencing is very real to the child. Don't try to discuss problems with the child when you are angry.

Regularly ask the child about her experiences. "What was school like today?" "How did the test go?" "What was the happiest thing that happened today?" Ask questions. Listen.

Remember that each person is different. You may have one child who cries over every experience. You may have another who keeps all feelings inside. Each child may need understanding in a different way. But each child needs understanding.

Help the child understand other people's feelings. "How do you think Mary felt about her dog being lost?" As you discuss feelings, try to understand what the other person feels.

Once a child feels understood, she is more likely to accept correction. She is more likely to want to obey.

How would you show understanding?

Susie has had her cousin Carol with her all summer. Now Carol has gone home. Susie comes in whining about how she will miss Carol.

How do we usually react in such a situation? Many parents would say something like: "You'll get over it." "You'll make more friends." "Stop whining." "Don't be a baby."

Do these statements show understanding? How will they make the child feel?

Can you think of some things to say that will show more understanding for Susie? What do you think of the following statements:



"I can see that you will be lonely without Carol."

"The house must seem empty now that Carol is gone."

"When you spent so much time together, it is hard to be apart."

"Carol has just left, but already you miss her."

Do the above statements show Susie that you understand her feelings? Would you feel comfortable using one of them?

Sometimes we think it's our job to help our children "get better" or get over their hurt feelings. But if we correct them ("Stop being a baby. You'll make new friends"), they may feel that we don't understand and don't care about how they feel. When we take time to understand ("I can see you'll be lonely without Carol"), they're more likely to feel that we care about them. Understanding and caring help them to feel better and help them to think of solutions for their problems.

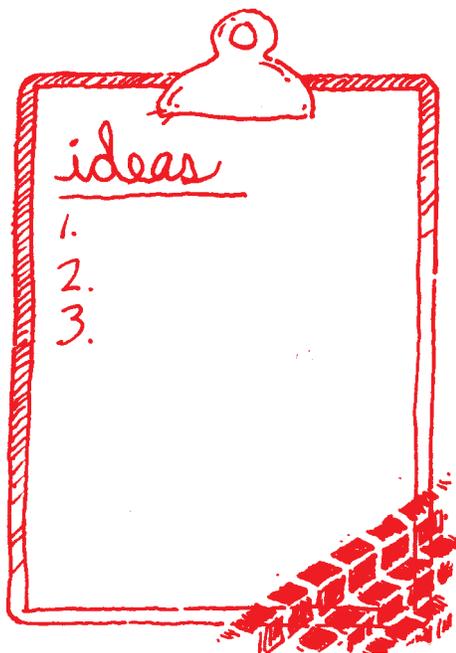
What about these situations?

What would you say if your 6-year-old Tommy said, "You're a rotten mother. I hate you!" A first reaction might be to become angry and punish the child. Or you might argue with the child: "You don't know what you're talking about. I'm the only mother who would put up with you." Or a parent might feel sad and cry.

What could you say to show that you understand the child's feelings?

You might say: "You seem to be very angry right now. I can understand that. I would like us to talk more about your feelings when you don't feel so angry."

Here's another situation: Your son comes home with a note that he's in trouble with the bus driver. What are you likely to say? What could you say that would show understanding? Try to think of some ways before you read further. Jot down your ideas.



If you take time to understand that he might feel embarrassed or angry, then you are very understanding! Of course, after he feels understood, it's a good idea to ask him what he can do to be sure he won't get in trouble with the bus driver in the future. It's not useful to blame either the boy or the bus driver. First, understand. Then, after he feels understood, discuss ways to prevent further trouble.

When parents use active listening, they help their children feel understood.

What is active listening?

Active listening is a way of showing understanding. It involves listening carefully and then, from time to time, describing how you think the person is feeling, or summing up what you think she has said. Let her correct or add to what you have said. Keep listening until you can tell she feels understood. Here are some ideas to help you be an active listener with your child:

- Take time to listen carefully to what the child is saying.
- See if you can identify what the child is feeling.
- Ask the child: "I wonder if you feel _____ (sad, alone, frustrated, confused)."
- After you describe the feeling, the child may want to correct or add to what you have said. Listen carefully.
- Maybe you will want to try again to describe what the child is feeling.

Active listening lets the child know you care about what she feels.

Taking time to understand what children feel sends a powerful message to them. It says to them, "You're important to me. I care about your feelings. I want to understand how you see things." Understanding is a powerful way to show love.

If we take time to listen to and understand our children, they are more likely to become confident and caring people. It takes many years to learn how to be as understanding as we would like to be. But it's well worth the effort.

If you want to learn more . . .

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Billy G. Hicks, Dean