

Developing the Art of Empathic Listening

Practice guide

Taken from Margot Sunderland (2015)

Conversations that matter: talking with children and teenagers in ways that help
Worth publishing Ltd

"Empathic listening is having the emotional space in our minds and hearts to feel into, imagine and think about a child's painful feelings." (Sunderland 2015, p.31)

Examples of empathic responses*:

It wonder how that might feel for you...	I really want to hear your side of things.
Wow, I wonder if that felt when...	Sometimes it's hard to....let's
I understand you really wanted/ needed to...	So painful...So much shock/sadness etc.
Let me see if I can understand what you are feeling...	Will you show me in a drawing what that made you feel?
Child draws: I'm wondering if you ever feel... like the....in your drawing?	To characters in child's drawings: hello..what's it like for you..?
I'm wondering what that's like for you?	So this really matters to you.
Child draws: I'm wondering if your story/picture reminds you of anything in your life?	I know about.... But would you help me understand what was happening for you?
Adult draws: I wonder if sometimes the world looks a bit like this for you?	I didn't really appreciate until now just how..... things have been for you. Thanks for telling me.
Using child's words: you were so ..., not just a bit ... and no-one knew?	(Once established) And you managed that all on your own?

Examples of common pitfalls identified by Sunderland*:

Common pitfalls

Example phrases

Quick fix mode

Oh dear I'll give you a nice drink to make you feel better.

Telling without listening

You have to calm down. Can't you just ... (prompt some action)...
You need to learn to share/ control your anger etc

Dismissing the feeling

Come on, don't be angry, it was only... Never mind, you'll feel better soon.

Judgemental

How could you be so... You're being really.... Boys will be boys.

Making assumptions

That must have made you feel so angry. How dreadful for you. Tell me about that sad cat in your picture.

Making the pain go away as it may be too painful for the adult

Yes dear, shall we do some drawing now and forget about it. Let's keep busy and ...(imposed cheerfulness)

Too cognitive (when emotion-focussed response is needed)

What do you think makes you feel that?

Burdening child with your feelings.

I feel so hopeless and sad because of what you have said.

False reassurances

Child: I don't know if my mum likes me. Adult: Oh I'm sure she does.

*Please refer to the full text detailed above for further examples, explanation and context for the examples shared.

