

Tips for Active Listening

Active listening involves behaviors and cues that indicate we hear and understand what the speaker is communicating. It is the ability to “listen actively.”

Active Listening Is⁷...

- ✓ Wanting to understand a young person’s message
- ✓ Trying to understand a young person’s message
- ✓ Respecting a young person’s feelings
- ✓ Trusting a young person’s ability to work through his/her issues
- ✓ Not projecting your own feelings and opinions onto the young person.

Characteristics of Active Listeners⁸

- ✓ Focus on Young Person. Active Listeners must be “other-directed” — conscious of and focused on others’ needs and wants, rather than his/her own personal preferences.
- ✓ Ready to Listen to Young Person. Active Listeners hear young people’s point of view, rather than to be defensive or protective of him-or herself.
- ✓ Aware of Young Person’s Circumstances. Active Listeners imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of young people, rather than assuming they are the same as one’s own.
- ✓ Be Neutral and Receive What the Young Person Says. Active Listeners listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and have a desire to understand the young person rather than to reach agreement with the young person or try to change the young person.

⁷ Adapted from www.takestockinchildren.com Mentor Bulletin #3

⁸ Adapted from the work of University of Maine researcher Dr. Marisue Pickering

Tips for Active Listening, continued

Active Listening Techniques⁹

Through training and practice, career coaches can develop an essential ability to listen actively.

- **Paraphrasing:** Paraphrasing is the foundation for many other facilitative listening skills, including mirroring and drawing people out. Paraphrasing has a calming and a clarifying effect. It reassures the young person that his or her ideas are worth listening to, and it provides the young person with a chance to hear how his/her ideas are being heard by others. Paraphrasing is especially useful on occasions when a young person's statements are confusing, because it helps the young person gauge how well his/her ideas are getting across.

How to Paraphrase: Use your own words to say what you think the young person said. If the young person said a lot, then summarize it. Preface your paraphrase by saying something like this: "It sounds like what you're saying is..." or "This is what I'm hearing you say..." or "Let me see if I'm understanding you..." When you've completed your paraphrase, look for the young person's reaction and ask, "Did I get it?"

- **Mirroring:** Mirroring captures a young person's exact words. It's a more formal version of paraphrasing. Some young people may want this degree of precision in order to feel they are truly being heard. Mirroring helps build trust and helps the career coach establish his or her neutrality.

How to Mirror: Always use the young person's exact words, not yours. Mirroring the young person's words and mirroring the young person's tone of voice are two different things. You want your tone to remain warm and accepting, regardless of what the young person's voice sounded like. Be yourself with your gestures and tone of voice.

- **Encouraging:** Encouraging is the art of creating an opening for a young person to say more, especially at the beginning of a conversation when the young person is warming up.

How to Encourage: What additional ideas or thoughts do you have? Is there another perspective on this issue? Can you give an example? What questions does this raise for you?

⁹ Adapted from the Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-making, Kaner et.al. See www.communityatwork.com

Tips for Active Listening, continued

- **Intentional Silence:** Intentional silence consists of a pause, lasting no more than a few seconds, and it's done to give the young person brief extra "quiet time" to discover what s/he wants to say. A young person may need momentary silence because s/he is not fully in touch with what s/he is thinking or feeling. The young person may also be wrestling over whether or not to say something that might be risky. Or, the young person may need to organize their thoughts.

How to Create Intentional Silence: The ability to tolerate the awkwardness most people feel during silence is the most important element of this skill. With eye contact and body language, stay focused on the young person. Say nothing (not even a "hmmm" or "uh huh") and be still (not even a nod or head shake). Stay relaxed and pay attention. Intentional silence lasts no more than five seconds.