

Family Life

Living in Loveland

Showing Love by Being Understanding



Have you ever had anyone listen to your pain and seem to really understand what you felt? Did that person say just the right thing to show that she or he understood and cared how you felt? That is a powerful experience! Unfortunately it is also quite rare. When people have difficulties we often give them advice: "What you need to do is . . ."

Giving advice does not show understanding. It tends to rush people on to a solution. There is an interesting contradiction about giving advice to people in pain: when we try to drag people from their pain, they tend to hold on to it more stubbornly. When we bring compassion and understanding to their pain, they are more likely to relax and get ready to move on. Understanding is very healing!

Showing understanding is a very effective way to show that you care - especially with children. Children get lots of advice, threats, and commands. It is a real treat for them when someone takes time to understand them. Understanding is a small thing that makes a big difference.

Understanding is shown with both words and actions. For example, if a child loses her favorite doll, an understanding response might include helping her look for the doll and saying words that show that we are trying to see the situation as the child does: "You really miss your dolly!" If the doll is not found, the parent can again show understanding with words and actions: The parent might hold the child and say, "That dolly means a lot to you! You are worried about finding her." Being understood helps the child feel safe and valued in spite of her loss.

The key to understanding is seeing an experience through the child's eyes and trying to understand what it means to the child. Understanding is NOT saying "I know how you feel." Understanding comes from working very hard to see things from the child's perspective. "You really feel strongly about this." "You seem very upset." "I wonder if you feel disappointed and lonely." No matter how hard we try to understand, we never fully understand someone else's point of view. That is why we ask questions and are always open for more information. Because understanding is so important, there is also a unit in this series called "Empathy and Understanding Help Children."

Understanding is especially helpful in dealing with pain, **but it is also very relationship-building when a child has any strong emotion.** If a child is very excited about making a new friend, we can share their excitement: "You are so glad to know Max!" "It felt good to win the game!" "You are glad to have that test over."

The clearest signal that it is time for understanding is a person's strong emotion. When a child is delighted, depressed, confused, or exuberant, it is a good time to be understanding. Understanding is a great way to show your love to your children.

Applications.

For a few minutes, stop being you. Imagine yourself as one of your children. Be him or her. See what she sees. Feel what he feels. Worry about what she worries about. How does it feel to be in his shoes? Do you better understand what life is like for her? Do the same for each member of your family.

In your mind, picture a scene where your child comes to you with strong feelings. What is your automatic way of responding? Does it show understanding? What can you do to better show understanding?

Think about each of your children. Children try very hard to be good. Think about the ways your child tries to be helpful. Try to understand that even the things the child does that are not very helpful may happen because of lack of understanding or because of tiredness. Appreciate how hard he or she tries.

When children feel safe and loved, sometimes they will ask for advice. Or sometimes they seem to want help finding answers. We can ask: "May I suggest some things you could try?" If the child is open to your ideas, share them and invite the child to decide which would work for him or her. If the child does not want ideas, be patient and understanding.

Being understanding does not mean that we do not set boundaries. There are times when a parent will need to say, "I know that you are very upset, but we do not hurt people." Understanding does not mean that there are no standards; it means that we care about their feelings. We still set limits on children's behavior. See the unit "Setting Limits."

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