

# Really

## Listening to Children and Youth

When Philip began to complain about stomach aches, his mother took him to the doctor. When he resisted going to play at school recess, his teacher shooed him out the door. When he came home from school without his lunch box, his father scolded him. When Philip seemed increasingly moody and sullen at Sunday school, his teacher concluded that he had been up too late.

The truth is... Philip was being consistently and routinely harassed and bullied by a group of older boys at his school. How could it be that all the important adults in Philip's life missed the clues?

Why didn't Philip tell—not tattle, but tell what is happening to him? Could it be that Philip is just not used to having adults listen to him? Or, even worse, if he told adults in the past, is he accustomed to having unhelpful adult responses?

Consider these possible responses and ask yourself, "Which is best?"

Philip tells an adult that he is being harassed and bullied at school.

Adult response #1: Tomorrow I want you to go straight to the principal and tell her what is happening.

Adult response #2: Philip! How many times have I told you to stand up for yourself! You've got to learn to fight back.

Adult response #3: Oh, you should be careful. Maybe you need to play in another part of the playground.

Adult response #4: Philip, you're an amazingly resourceful boy. I think you can figure out what to do.

Adult response #5: Oh, that upsets me. Kids today just don't know the difference between right and wrong. If only more kids went to Sunday school...

Adult response #6: Oh, I see what's happening. Other children are bullying you and getting pleasure from using their power. Others are bystanders and you are designated as the victim.

Adult response #7: Hey, cheer up, Philip. I'm sure tomorrow will be a better day.

Adult response #8: Who are these kids? Where do they pick on you? When does this happen?

If you disliked all these responses, you have identified most of the reasons why Philip simply can't or won't tell adults the terrible thing that is happening to him. Adults have ordered and given advice (#1), ridiculed (#2), warned (#3), dismissed his concern by praising him (#4), judged (#5), analyzed (#6), humored (#7) and questioned (#8).

How might these adults have listened differently? Here's a second list.

1. Philip's adults kneel down to his eye level and use lots of **minimal encouragers** as they listen. Minimal encouragers say, "I'm paying attention." Minimal encouragers are nods, little smiles, mmm... .
2. Philip's adults use a lot of **silence**. They don't interrupt or make comments. They just wait patiently until Philip can gather his thoughts and feelings. Their silence is a gift to Philip who has not had as many years to become articulate.
3. Philip's adults know how to **paraphrase**. A paraphrase repeats back what Philip says but uses different words. If Philip says, "I hate going on that school bus," the adult answers, "Going on the school bus is difficult for you." A paraphrase says to Philip, "I'm hearing you," and also allows both parties to clarify wrong information. If the adult misunderstands Philip, he can correct matters by stating things a different way.
4. Philip's adults ask **open-ended questions**. "Can you tell me what happened next?" "How did that seem to you?" "What made the difference between yesterday and today?" Open-ended questions let Philip explore what is troubling him. They let him continue with his story.
5. Philip's adults **reflect feelings**. They listen for the emotional content behind Philip's words because Philip can't always distinguish between his feelings and thoughts. When he says, "That school bus is stupid!" the adult says, "You really hate going on the school bus."
6. Philip's adults, especially his parents, are good at saying, "**Come, let's have a hug.**" When children are used to coming to a parent or other caring adult for small hurts, they are much more inclined to come for big hurts as well.

Being a good listener does not fall out of the sky as a ready-made gift from God, although some of us are more naturally empathic. Listening is a skill that can be developed like any other skill. From good listening flows kindness, compassion, reconciliation, gentleness, restraint and hope—all fruits of God's Spirit.

