



# Montessori Matters



*With many thanks to Shannon, Sharri, and Travis (for the bowls he made); to the children for their glazing; and to all parents for their support, over \$1000 was raised during Empty Bowl for Channel One.*

## In This Issue

Empathic Listening ..... 1

## Current Events

Please support our chances to win a Smart Board with HyVee shopping.

Many thanks for your Annual Fund contributions. We've now raised \$4000 towards our goal of \$25,000!

## On the Calendar

### November

*Annual Fund Continues*

23-25 **School Closed: Thanksgiving**

### December

- 7 E1 Parents' Meeting with Pizza  
Dinner 5:30 – 7:00 PM
- 8 Birches Work with Your Child  
Morning 10:30 – 11:30 AM
- 8 Students Moving to Middle School  
Parents' Meeting 5:30 – 7:00 PM
- 13 E1 Parents' Morning Visit  
7:45 – 9:00 AM
- 14 Board Meeting 7:00 PM
- 15 Priority Enrollment Application Dead-  
line for Siblings
- 16 Oaks Parents' Morning Visit,  
10:30-11:30 AM

# Empathic Listening

*By Cate Crombie*

(Editor's note: RMS enjoyed having Cate Crombie in residence one year ago. Cate is a trainer in Compassionate Communication with the International Centre for NonViolent Communication<sup>SM</sup>. She has also been an instructor with Effectiveness Training for over three decades. Her passion is in educating and enabling adults to communicate more effectively. Cate is well known to audiences in her hometown of Brisbane and also around Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and in the United States. You can learn more about Cate and her trainings at [www.MetaCommuniCate.com](http://www.MetaCommuniCate.com).

## *The Value of Empathic Listening in Families*

Everyone longs to be listened to, to be heard. This has been my experience in 30 years of teaching interpersonal communication in a variety of settings. Adults as well as children, when in emotional pain, want others to understand and be there for us. Sadly, in my experience, many people do not know how to be empathetic listeners. When someone is hurt or upset, we may mean well and believe we are helping by giving advice, consoling, reassuring, probing and questioning for more information, sympathizing or even changing the subject. Sometimes what seems like a big issue to them does not seem, to us, that large a problem. If we are not being effective listeners' people may keep retelling the story and never getting to the heart of the matter. Over time, we may grow weary of hearing about it and resort to trying to 'fix' them or the problem. These common and ineffective ways of responding are not only communication blocks they also thwart the person who is upset in being able to process their emotions. This is where empathic listening is such a valuable alternative.

What is important is to have a healthy understanding of how to empathically listen, in order to be a good listener. There are three qualities to being a helpful listener; the first is **Acceptance** of the other persons experience and that this is their reality in this



**Writing happens throughout the Montessori curriculum. A four year old writes his first phonetic words (left) . Two kindergartners (right) record the names of animals after classifying pictures according to their native continent habitats.**

place and time; the second is **Genuine-ness** or being real or authentic about our willingness to listen here and now. Sometimes, though, we need to be willing to temporarily put our needs on hold to be fully there for the other person/child; the third is **Empathy**, which is often described as the capacity to recognize feelings (such as sadness or happiness) that are being experienced by another.

Most importantly, however, ‘deep listening’ empathy requires us to be able to recognize ‘needs’ as well as feelings that are being expressed. This means that it is essential to develop a ‘needs’ literacy. These are universal human needs shared by all no matter what age, gender or where we happen to live in the world. The same needs are present for someone living a traditional life in Africa, as they will be for a child or adult living in suburban Australia. Lists of these universal human needs and feelings is available from the Montessori Australia Council website. <http://montessori.edu.au/>

Essential to being an effective listener is to begin by holding back on saying much yourself and simply listening. Be fully present moment by moment to what the person is saying. Let go of any analysis as to what they may say next. Suspend your judgments about what

the person is saying and feeling. Even if you happen to disagree with their words, you can look for the ‘feelings’ and ‘needs’ underlying the words. Offer your guess to them. It helps to clarify through the conversation. For example if a child says, “*No one plays with me at lunchtime!*” we may be tempted to respond in those typical ways mentioned above. Rather, you can express your guess at what ‘feelings and needs’ you are hearing them say, for example “*do you feel sad (feeling) because you would really like to have some fun (need) with friends (need) at playtime?*” Also, best not to mirror back exactly what they said; “*so nobody plays with you at lunchtime.*” This kind of parroting is usually not only very irritating to the person who is upset, but also reinforces victim thinking. Hearing feelings and needs and reflecting these guesses back is very powerful. Try it out and see the results for yourself.

Even though reflecting back your best guess of others feelings and needs may seem artificial at first, with practice you can make it your own. After a while you will find ways to use more everyday words and it will soon feel more natural.

What usually follows from this authentic guess for understanding as to what is alive in the upset person is their greater

connection to themselves. With connection to needs, amazingly then double strategies and solutions often spontaneously appear.

I predict that you will be inspired at the responses you will get from other people. When having a sense of someone being truly present to them and experience being fully heard, children and adults alike respond positively. People of all ages will value your presence, sincerity and compassion. With this kind of listening, it’s also possible for misunderstandings to be clarified before they are blown out of proportion. Benefits include greater self-understanding for the person you are listening to as well as increasing your self-insight and self-awareness.

When listening it is helpful to allow periods of silence in the conversation. Some people take longer to process thoughts and emotions. The person may be gathering their thoughts and when ready will continue to talk. During those moments of silence, in your own mind, maintain your attention on what the person may now be feeling and needing. The look in your eyes will be quite different if do this than if you are judging them or mentally gathering information to tell them what to do about their problem. You may be surprised to discover how much our nonverbal facial expressions and





***The value of multi-age grouping: An older child explains what causes this plant to droop.***

body language are being picked up by others. Our judgment and criticism of others is conveyed even when we are saying nothing.

Even more importantly, should you find yourself in a disagreement with another adult or child, a golden rule is; listen for their feelings and needs before expressing your own. When people are heard first, two things potentially happen; firstly, they have the opportunity to connect with their own feelings and needs rather than just the thoughts in their head; and, secondly, their emotional temperature will most likely reduce.

In order to have this capacity to suspend your own expression you may need to do a lot of self-listening to your own feelings and needs. You may also be afraid that your needs will be lost. If this is the case then it's important to find a trusted friend or counselor who will listen to your feelings and needs without engaging in 'fix-it' solutions for you. With this high quality of listening for you, it's more likely that you will be able to stay present to the people in your family and life in moments when they are in emotional distress. It also

supports you in staying true to yourself and ensuring that your needs matter, too.

**10 more ideas for being an effective empathic listener:**

1. Give the person your full presence and attention. If appropriate, maintain eye contact. Be aware that for some people of different cultural backgrounds eye contact can be interpreted as aggressive. For some boys and men eye contact is not comfortable. In this case sitting side by side is more conducive to the person opening up. Keep from fidgeting or trying to multi-task especially if you are listening on the phone.
2. If you are not available to give the person your full attention, let them know. "You've caught me at a difficult time. I need to take care of something that I'm doing right now. Could we catch up at another time? When suits you?"
3. Now that you have developed or are growing your listening skills, please be aware that there is no obligation to listen to everyone who would like you to. Your time is of value to you. Be selective as to who you will give it too in protection of your resources including your energy.
4. Use open-ended questions to begin the conversation and show that you are willing to listen. For example, you may say things like "would you like to say more about what's happening?" This shows interest in the other person. Take care, though, with your intention around questions. Is it that you want to direct the discussion? The person who asks the questions is in control the flow of the conversation. Be a follower of the content and where the speaker is going. Only offer what you are guessing are their feelings and needs not solutions. Use questions to show you are seeking understanding rather than to gain information.
5. Use sharing a similar experience from your own life with care and sparingly, "that reminds me when that happened to me." If you do this, however, you are changing the direction of the conversation to be about you while pretending to listen. When you are listening empathically

your complete focus is on the other person.

6. Let the speaker complete his or her own sentences. Be careful if you find yourself anticipating what they are going to say. Hold back.
7. Find ways to show sincere appreciation or acknowledgement for what feelings, needs and especially any insights that the person has identified in your conversation.
8. It's not a requirement to have to agree with the other person. Showing empathy is acknowledging their needs and feelings, it doesn't mean you necessarily agree with assessment of the problem or their solutions and strategies.
9. If your time is limited let the person know your availability, rather than frequently checking the clock.
10. Respectful communication applies to everyone including children, the elderly, a homeless person on the street and the telemarketer who phones at dinnertime. Live your values and respond to others, as you would want to be responded to. Show compassion for others and show compassion for yourself.



***The metal insets (above) are one of a young child's first writing exercises. The insets are traced. Later, additional strokes - vertical, horizontal, or diagonal - are added.***

