

# **5 Surprising Tips** **for Connecting** **with Children** **(that everyone should know)**



By Sandra R. Blackard  
Founder of Language of Listening®

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## Contents

1. Take children seriously - treat them like little scientists.....	1
2. Acknowledge the children's intentions - especially when things go badly .....	2
3. Validate what children like and don't like - don't try to change it.....	3
4. Don't push children to join in - describe what they are seeing instead .....	4
5. Avoid questioning children - make an observation instead .....	6
BONUS TIP: General Touchstone.....	8



# 5 Surprising Tips for Connecting with Children (that everyone should know)

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## 1. Take children seriously - treat them like little scientists

Children don't think like adults, but this doesn't mean the way they think is wrong. You can consider childhood as the testing phase for cause and effect logic. To a child, anything really is possible. What they tell you is a window into that world - the world where fantasy becomes discovery. You can provide facts as a child requests, but remind yourself to listen with wonder not skepticism.

While much of cause and effect testing is complete by age 6<sup>1</sup>, the testing goes on well beyond that in surprising ways. For example, at age 8, my niece was with me in the car listening to a fantasy song about growing a popcorn tree and asked, "Can that really happen?" Instead of dismissing it as silly, I took her seriously and said, "Sounds like you think it really could."

Feeling safe to continue, she went on to tell me that at camp she and a friend who had just lost a tooth had planted his tooth in the dirt, watered it, and were going to check on it the next day. They thought it might grow. In their world, anything was possible.

My response went something like this: "That makes sense. A tooth looks like a seed, and you know seeds grow in dirt. You probably remember when we planted a few kernels of corn last year." She nodded.

Having validated her thinking first, I went on to provide a couple of facts and let her figure out the rest. "Teeth usually grow in mouths, but you're wondering if there might be another way. Actually, scientists are working on that kind of question in the field of medical cloning right now. You can look it up." Instead of feeling silly, she saw herself as a scientist looking for answers to replacing lost teeth.

"Anything is possible" is a hallmark of childhood that outside-of-the-box thinkers strive for. You can keep that thinking intact by taking children seriously without hurrying them to be practical.

## 2. Acknowledge the children's intentions - especially when things go badly

*"Parents need to learn to respond to their children as they do to guests."  
— Dr. Haim Ginott<sup>2</sup>*

Picture the simple scenario of a child handing you a freshly picked flower with a grin that won't quit. Precious, until you realize that it must have come from somebody's garden. Or how about the child that brings you a breakfast tray in bed, leaving a trail of cereal and milk across the carpet?

Despite the downside of a child's attempts to help, remember that the child's greatness lies in his/her intentions. Acknowledge the intention first and thoroughly before bringing attention to the problem.

In the case of the flower, it could sound like, "You brought me a flower. You know I like flowers and you picked an especially pretty one just for me! That was very thoughtful!" After this acknowledgment, you can add guidance as needed. "You like picking flowers for me. You can pick them in our yard anytime. This one looks like it came from our neighbor's yard. You must have thought that was OK."

If the child nods and doesn't say he asked, you can add, "The rule is to ask first. If you didn't check, you need to go back and find out if our neighbor cares and what she would like you to do about it. I want you to feel comfortable with our neighbor and her with you. I would be happy to come with you, if you would like me to."

With the cereal, after acknowledging the child's intentions and wishes for you to have a pleasant morning, you can point out the spill by saying something like, "Oops! There's a trail of cereal on the floor." Give the child a chance to look and respond on his own, and you might find out you have a child who knows how to use a sponge or towels to clean up spills. If not, add the direction needed for him to succeed, and acknowledge him for being helpful.

Solving problems is how children learn. Keep it positive by focusing on their intentions. Children's intentions really are pure.

### 3. Validate what children like and don't like - don't try to change it

When a child says, "That's cool," about a creepy spider or gets excited about a toy in a store, validate the child with a simple, "You like that!" and notice the instant connection.

The same goes with things a child doesn't like. Arguing to change a child's tastes is not only futile but increases the child's resistance and creates distance between you and the child. Now the child is wrong to like what she likes unless you agree, which sets her up for future struggles with peer pressure.

Tastes are personal and the most basic expression of ourselves. This came across loud and clear at my mother's memorial service. In life, her favorite indulgence was doughnuts, so we made sure to include a tray of doughnuts in the refreshments. I was amazed how deeply guests were touched. They laughed and cried in remembrance when they saw it. What you like and love is who you really are.

In addition to creating a personal connection, validating what children like and don't like keeps them from having to dig in their heels to prove they are right. Liking something one day and not liking it the next is typical during childhood. Without the need to defend what they like and don't like, children can remain flexible until permanent tastes are formed.

If you're concerned about validating what a child likes, like a toy in a store, because you think you will have to buy it, you may have inadvertently created that pattern. If you don't like the pattern, the sooner you reverse it, the better.

To reverse the pattern requires you to trust in your child's resilience and her ability to handle disappointment. It may help to remind yourself that disappointment is a passing emotion like anger or frustration, and one your child needs to know she can handle.

Parents who have tried this are often astonished at how well validation works, even with younger children. One mother who dreaded shopping with her four-year-old son and almost two-year-old daughter shared this:

*We were at a toy store. I hate going in there with both children because my son always has a melt-down over some toy, and that sets off my little one, but this day I had to. He saw a truck on a shelf and started whining about wanting to have it.*

*I checked and my daughter was entertaining herself in the cart, so I got down to his level and started saying how wonderful the truck was. I validated everything he said about how much he wanted it and how fun it would be to play with it. When he asked again if he could have it, I braced myself, said no, and immediately returned to saying how much he wished he could have it and how sad he was to have to put it back on the shelf and leave it behind.*

*I was amazed to see him nod and return it to the shelf all on his own. He took my hand, we stood up and walked away from it without a fuss! This stuff works like a fire extinguisher!*

What children like is a core piece of their identity and a critical element in their personal compass that will guide them in life. Raising children to know what they like gives them a solid foundation. You might have heard about people who are trying to find themselves. This is what they are looking for. Validating what children like and don't like keeps them from ever getting lost.

#### **4. Don't push children to join in - describe what they are seeing instead**

Pushing children to join into activities increases reluctance; trusting their desire to join in melts it away. You can facilitate joining in by following their gaze and describing what they are seeing.

Children naturally want to join in where there are other children playing. It doesn't matter if the child is a 12-year-old who just stepped out of a soccer game in frustration or if the child is a 12-month-old in a room full of toddlers.

Trust is easy when you understand how kids work - reluctant children engage by observing first, building their confidence, then joining in. Observation leads to action, so the best way to help a child join in is to describe what he is seeing.

For example, as a volunteer in a daycare setting, I was handed a 12-month-old child and warned not to put him down or he would cry. As he was handed to me, the child turned his head to avoid eye-contact, so rather than trying to catch his eye which would have increased his agitation, I sat down in a chair with him facing outward on my lap.

At first his eyes darted uncomfortably from one child to another, but when he settled on a little girl with a busy box I simply began describing what he was seeing without any hint of pushing him to join in, because I knew that he already was.

I said, "She's playing with that box, making sounds - click, click, crunch, crunch, ding, ding..." As I spoke he looked from the child to me and back again - eye-contact achieved on his terms.

Next he turned to the window, so I slid him off my lap onto the chair so he could see better. Sensing no resistance, I continued, "You see that boy out there running with his dad. They're chasing. Back and forth. There they go again..." He watched them for a while then turned back to the room, leaned forward slightly and started kicking his legs, a tell-tale sign that he was soon to physically engage. We observed one more child together before he actually slid off the chair.

His first move was onto a nearby padded slide, returning to the security of our chair between attempts. Succeeding with the slide twice, he toddled over to the other children, got a toy and ran back to our chair. After doing this several more times, he ended up staying with the other children and just looking back. After one or two returned glances, my work was done. He was fully engaged with the toys and the other children in the room.

With a frustrated 12-year-old at a soccer game, you will see the same thing, if you trust that observing is about re-engaging, not avoiding the game. Again your job is to simply notice what the child is seeing and let her work it out. The more you support her in feeling what she's feeling (even feelings you do not like) without trying to change them or fix the problem, the sooner she addresses the problem herself. It's counter-intuitive, but it's the way children work.

For example, with a child who has left the game for the sidelines:

*You: "You decided to watch for a while." (spoken without criticism)*

*Child: "I can't make any goals. See, she just kicks it, and it goes in, but the goalie always stops mine."*

*You: "You're watching how she's doing it, to see what she does."*

*Child: "Look. She didn't do anything different than me, but when I do that it doesn't work. It's me. I just can't play this stupid game!"*

*You: "You really wish you could. You want to make goals, but it feels too hard."*

By saying what the child is feeling, she no longer has to prove to you she can't do it. Without the need to defend her reluctance, it starts to disappear and her natural drive to participate kicks in. The length of time can vary depending on how much the child has been pushed in the past, but it will help you remain patient if you remember that as long as she is willing to watch or talk about an activity, she is engaged and moving forward.

Listen closely for moments like this when the situation begins to shift:

*Child: "Wait. Did you see that? She just missed that one. She didn't look before she kicked."*

*You: "You saw her mistake. You know what she should've done."*

For many children, self-confidence starts with knowing something. When a child hits that point, it's just a matter of time until she steps back in to test out what she knows. At any age, observation builds the confidence a child needs to join in and succeed. Your part is to trust this natural cycle without pushing, and let the child do the rest.

## 5. Avoid questioning children - make an observation instead

This may be the oddest tip of all, but it has truly surprising results when applied. Although we are taught from an early age that questions are the way to open conversations, questions tend to shut children down.

There are a number of reasons for this, but the main one is that most of the questions we ask put us in control of the conversation. Once an adult asks a child a question, politeness dictates that they answer.

Observations are different. When you simply make a statement like, "You look busy," a child can nod and keep playing, or go on to tell you more. How to respond is up to the child. Observations based on what the child is paying attention to are the best because they don't disturb the child's flow of thought, they enhance it.

Here's a few more examples from my award-winning book, [SAY WHAT YOU SEE for Parents and Teachers: More hugs. More respect. Elegantly simple:](#) (<http://www.languageoflistening.com/resources/read-swys-book>)



*Statements encourage communication and help us follow the child's lead. Questions can feel threatening and inhibit a child's expression, as though there is a "right" answer.*

*Questions such as, "What's in your hand?" or "Why are you holding that rock?" tend to cause a quick hand-behind-the-back response. Whereas, the non-threatening statement, "You've got a rock," encourages a flow of information like, "It's MY rock. I found it with my Grandpa when we went for a walk in the woods. My dog was there; his name is Chips. My mommy doesn't like dogs..."*



*Questions can also be directive. Questions like, "Don't you think scissors would work better for cutting out that circle?" direct the child to do something the adult way rather than encourage creativity.*



*Instead, when you say what you see as in, "You're tearing the paper around that circle," the child can tell you, "I like the way the edges look. They make my circle look like the sun," or the child can say, "This isn't working. I need scissors." Either way, the child's opinions and problem solving skills are encouraged.*

*The final type of counterproductive question is the non-question. We usually use this one when we are annoyed and far from seeing the good in the child. Non-questions are basically a way to deliver criticism or introduce a lecture as in, "What are you doing in there?" Appropriately, non-questions result in defensive non-answers like, "Nothing!" To put children at ease and get real information, back-up and simply say what you see as in, "I hear banging noises in there." You might actually get an answer like, "I just accidentally knocked some books off the shelf," or a self-correction like, "Sorry. I'll be more careful next time."*

The younger the child, the more important avoiding questions becomes, although when I asked several teenagers, their number one complaint was also, "Adults ask too many questions!"

Here's one last example that provides an instant contrast:

*I was in the hallway of a preschool at parent pick-up time. A mother had stopped to talk to a friend, and her 18-month-old son was standing in front of her holding a stuffed turtle. I leaned over and said, "You have a turtle." The child looked at me then pointed to the turtle's face and slowly said, "Eye."*

*The child was clearly proud of this new word, so I replied, "You know that's an eye!" Smiling, he pointed to another part of the face and said, "Nose." I responded, "You know that's a nose!" Completely tickled with himself, he turned the toy around and pointed again, "Tail!" By simply observing and letting him lead the conversation about his toy, I had made a friend.*

*I spoke to his mother briefly about all the things he knew, and she said he was proud of his new words. I said goodbye to them both and watched them walk a few feet away and step into the office. What happened there was so predictable.*

*In the office, the director approached the child and in a sweet voice asked, "What's your turtle's name?" The child got flustered and immediately hid behind his mother's legs and wouldn't come out!*

Same child, different response just because the director used a question instead of an observation.



**BONUS TIP: General Touchstone**

In evaluating the success of your interactions with a child ask yourself: **"How does that leave the child feeling about him or herself?"** If your answer is "proud", "confident", "thoughtful", "considerate", "responsible", "wise" or any other possible human strength, you will know you have connected.

Connection is the first step in creating healthy, cooperative relationships with children. Effective guidance can be achieved with two more. I've put all three steps together for you in a simple model - the Language of Listening® - that I'll be talking about in each newsletter. If you want to learn it even more quickly, you can take our [online workshop](http://www.languageoflistening.com/classes/online-training-registration) ( <http://www.languageoflistening.com/classes/online-training-registration> ) any time you like. Thank you for joining our community. I look forward to helping you create more hugs, more respect and more connection in your life!

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1 Dr. Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 55.

2 Dr. Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Child: The Bestselling Classic That Revolutionized Parent-Child Communication* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 3.