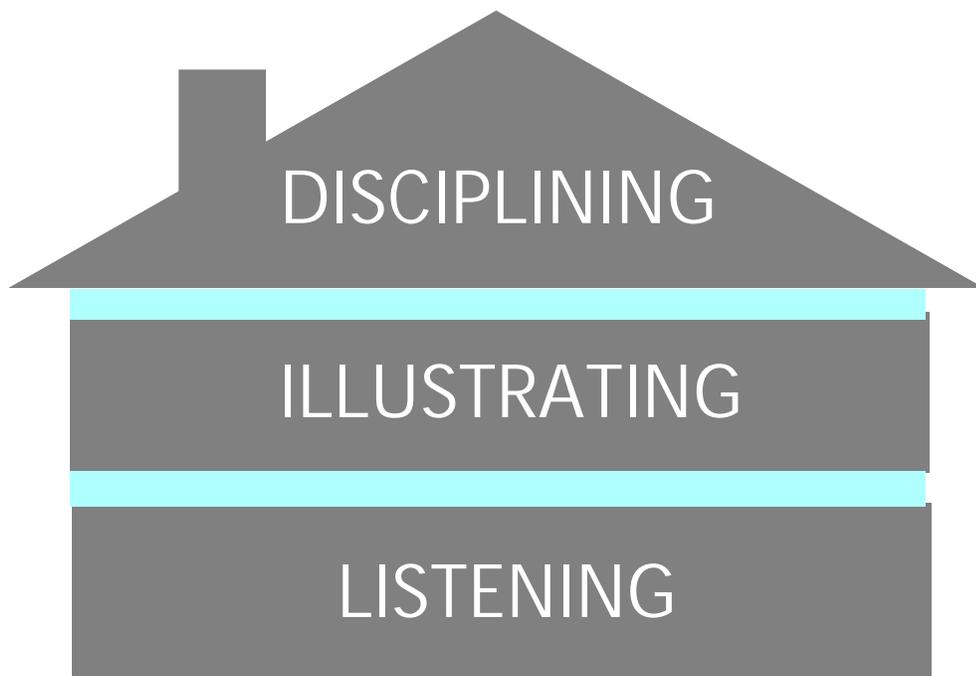

Calming the Explosive Volcano

Helping Children Learn to Cooperate



A Course in New-School Parenting

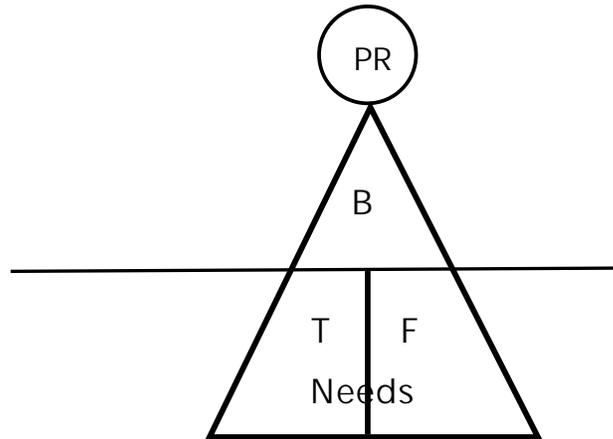
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Volcano Theory

B = Behavior; T = Thoughts, Memories; F = Feelings, Emotions
PR = Power Refinery



1. Thoughts and Feelings motivate and determine all Behavior in everyone.
MY thoughts and MY feelings control MY behavior.
HIS/HER thoughts and HIS/HER feelings control HIS/HER behavior.
2. Only I can control my behavior. Only you can control yours. Only s/he can control her/his behavior. You can't control anybody but yourself. You can't make anyone do anything.
 - I can't control you. You can't control me.
 - You can't control your child. S/he can't control you.
3. You always do what you want—not what I want.
I always do what I want—not what you want.
S/he always does what s/he wants—not what you want.
4. Influence does not equal control. You have lots of influence, but no control over your child.
5. Attempts at control = your one-way ticket to trouble:

Orders, commands, demands	}	=	YOUR ONE-WAY TICKET TO TROUBLE
Yelling, arguing, anger, fighting	}	=	
Lectures, logic, preaching, teaching	}	=	
Punishing, grounding	}	=	
Insults, threats, choices	}	=	
Hitting, pushing: ALWAYS BAD and	}	=	
7. Positive methods of influence = listening, modeling, I-messages, dialogue, agreements.

The Delusion of Parental Control¹

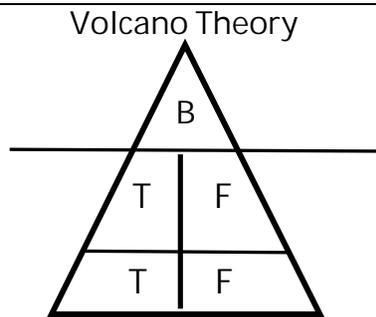
Delusion: a belief falsely held, Webster

The English language plays tricks on us that we either don't notice, or just live with. "The sun *rises* and *sets*."

This kind of talk is a delusion that the advertiser's methods are "driving" internet surfers to the website.

We do this with people too. On the internet advertisers talk about "*driving traffic*" to a specific website.

We often delude ourselves into thinking a parent can or *should be able to* control a child's behavior. Here's why that's impossible.



In this diagram, the volcano represents the human being, of any age—child or adult. Inside the person thoughts (T) and feelings (F) motivate and determine all behavior (B), which is visible to, or heard by, others. Some Ts & Fs are unconscious—but we are concerned with what is conscious.

Because a person's thoughts and feelings motivate and determine their behavior, only that person can control their own behavior. Parents influence, but can't control, a child. Cooperation is all we can hope for from the child. *That's* what we really want. It's far better than obedience.

! "Wow! Mr. Jones really has his kids under control, doesn't he?"

! "Look at that helpless mother! She should get control of that child!"

! "I want to control Johnny better."

Delusional Thinking

Correct Thinking

Here are some examples of *delusional thinking*—a delusion is *something that is falsely believed* (Merriam-Webster, 10th Ed.)

My "Volcano Theory" says that thoughts (T) and feelings (F) motivate and determine every person's behavior (B), no matter their age.

Implications:

This has some profound implications that can greatly enhance the parent-child relationship.

- ! Since *my* Ts & Fs motivate *my* B, only I can control my own B.
- ! For the same reason, only the child can control their own B.
- ! Thus, no one can make anyone do anything. The other person has to want to do it.
- ! A mother and father have no control over their children's behavior whatsoever.
- ! Although parents cannot control their children's behavior, they do have plenty of influence.
- ! Influence does not equal control.
- ! The best that parents can hope to get from their children is voluntary cooperation.
- ! Since Ts & Fs are internal processes, no one can actually see or know another's Ts & Fs unless the other shares that information.

! To understand a child's Behavior, the parent must understand the child's Thoughts and Feelings that motivate and determine it.

! Parents can learn best about their child's behavior by *listening* to what the child has to say about their motivations.

! A child's "volcanic eruption" (*tantrum*) is least destructive when the energy erupts through the hole at the top of the volcano, the *mouth*, rather than through the hands and feet.

First step to parent-child harmony

These ideas are discussed in more detail in my articles on Listening.

Step 1 to harmony: Don't try to control the child's behavior. You can't do it. Instead, invite cooperation. Cooperation is the very best you can get. It's what you really want.

The best way to get cooperation from a child is by *listening to the child*. The reason for this is that when the parent listens, the child is likely to listen. Then there is real dialogue and dialogue makes agreement possible. A child will more readily "buy into" what they have agreed to than what they have been told to do. This is cooperation—better than obedience!

Invitations to Trouble

How parents invite anger and defensiveness in children.

Note: I am indebted to Thomas Gordon, MD, for so clearly identifying in his wonderful book *Parent Effectiveness Training* the following (and other) forms of parental communication that cause problems with children. He calls them "the typical twelve." I have modified a few of them.

The following common methods that parents instinctively use to confront unacceptable child behaviors are exactly what the parent should NOT do. These are invitations to trouble. They are likely to be felt as an assault by the child, which then compounds the frustration and anger the child might already be feeling.

These forms of parental communication are "power and control tactics" aimed at making a child do something. They are almost always experienced as attacks by children. (They are also felt as attacks by adults, too, when they are spoken to in these ways.) If the child being is already upset or frustrated, hearing one of the following communications just compounds his difficulty, and now he is upset with parent for being treated disrespectfully. He is then likely to make the situation worse by directing venom at the parent.

I consider these forms of parental communication to be disrespectful because they almost always convey an attitude of superiority on the part of the parent. It's as if the parent is the one in charge of the child's behavior and has the right to tell the child off, or put the child in his place, whereas if the child were to talk to the parent in these ways, the parent would almost certainly not tolerate it. So the litmus test of whether some parental behavior is disrespectful is whether the parent would feel disrespected by the child if the child spoke or acted in these ways toward the parent.

1. Yelling, shouting, screaming. Loudly and angrily attempting to impose your will and your ideas on the child, like a drill sergeant would. These might be the most common parental faults. They convey an attitude of "I have the right and ability to control your behavior," but they also convey the parent's frustration and inability figure out a more respectful way of communicating with the child. They are clear examples of stooping to the child's level of immaturity.
"Stop jumping on the furniture!"
"Don't talk to me like that!"
"Shut up and do what you're told!"
2. Ordering, directing, commanding: Telling the child to do something. Giving an order or a command and expecting that the child will do it simply because you told her to. Even when spoken in a calm tone of voice, these communications convey the attitude of superiority that a parent would simply not tolerate coming from the child.
"I don't care what other parents do. You have to do the yard work."
"Now you go back up there and play with Ginny and Joyce!"
"Stop complaining!"
3. Warning, admonishing, threatening: Telling the child what consequence will occur if she does or fails to do something.
"If you do that, you'll be sorry."
"One more statement like that and you'll leave the room!"
"You'd better not do that if you know what's good for you."
4. Exhorting, moralizing, preaching: Telling the child what she *should* or *ought* to do, and giving a little sermon about why. These tend to be habitual little speeches that parents have given in one form or another many, many times. For that reason alone they are not necessary. The child knows these things already because she has heard them so often, and they are likely to be heard as "the same old thing." Furthermore, they invite an "in one ear and out the other" type of response from the child.
"You shouldn't act like that because people who do that are almost always.....blah, blah, blah."

"You ought to do this.....because if you don't then this is what will happen....blah, blah, blah."
"You must always respect your elders....because we went through the depression, we're older, etc."

5. Advising, giving solutions or suggestions: telling the child how to solve a problem, giving him advice or suggestions, or providing answers/solutions. If the child asks for advice, that's one thing. By all means give it. When your advice is unsolicited, it carries the unspoken message that "You can't do it right on your own. You're inadequate, and therefore you need me to tell you how to solve this problem."
"Why don't you ask both Ginny and Joyce to play down here?"
"Put that thought out of your mind. You have to wait a couple of years before deciding on college."
"I suggest you talk to your teachers about that."
6. Lecturing, teaching, giving logical arguments: Trying to influence the child with facts, arguments, opinions.
"Children must learn how to get along with each other because if they don't.....blah, blah, bah.."
"If kids learn to take responsibility around the house, they'll grow up to be responsible adults."
"Look at it this way--your mother needs help around the house because.....blah, blah, bah."
"When I was your age, I had twice as much to do as you., and I used to.....blah, blah, bah."
7. Ridiculing, name-calling, insulting, shaming: Making the child feel foolish. This might be the worst form of intimidation. It's not complaining about behavior, it's denigrating the child as a person. This kind of communication from a parent can, over time, seriously damage a child's self-esteem.
"You're nothing but a spoiled brat!"
"Look here, Mr. Smarty Pants."
"Okay, you little baby."
8. Judging, criticizing, blaming: Making a negative judgment or evaluation of the child. These, too, are clearly damaging to self-esteem.
"That's a stupid, immature thing to say."
"You don't know what you're talking about."
"You never manage to do anything right."
9. Interrupting, butting in, shutting the child down. Stopping the child from talking or doing what he is doing. This is usually experienced by adults as disrespectful and egotistical when they experience it from another adult, and certainly from a child.
"Stop what you're doing."
"Wait, wait, wait. Stop talking and listen to me."
"Hey! We don't talk that way around here!"

By using these "invitations to trouble," parents often stimulate feelings of hurt, shame, and resentment in a child. The unintended consequence, of course, is that it not only invites an angry or disrespectful response from the child (perhaps expressed later in a different situation), but it also teaches the child how you think people should be talked to. You can bet that your child will use the same methods with other people, especially peers and/or younger siblings.

There are much better ways than using these "invitations to trouble" in responding to a child, such as listening first and talking second, reflecting the child's feelings back to him (listening skill #3), using I-messages (illustrating skill #2), and taking a time-out to formulate what you want to say.

If you can catch yourself in time, before the first word has escaped, or even in mid-sentence, your child will notice and appreciate your effort at "cleaning up your act" by speaking more respectfully. She will learn from your effort at self-control. She may not express any appreciation at the moment, but you can bet that with repeated efforts on your part, you will start to see similar efforts on your child's part.

Parental Authority and Power Struggles

Power struggles seem to pervade all aspects of life. At the macro level, groups of people have fought each other for control of resources throughout history, and it continues to this day. At the national level groups fight for control of resources, money, and votes. The same is true at the state and community levels. At the level of the family the same process occurs, where individuals—whether they be spouses, parents and children, or brothers and sisters—fight each other for control. Even within individuals, unseen and unknown wars are constantly being fought between cells for dominance within the person, which result in life or death for both those cells and their host.

I wish to focus on the family level. Power struggles in many families are almost endless, with spouses trying to control each other's behavior and with parents trying to control children's behavior while children try to control parental behavior. The result of these power struggles is often damaging to the parent-child relationship. The parent completely undermines his/her credibility and legitimate authority by engaging in power struggles. It's like a general arguing with a private over whether the private has to do k.p. Parents have the authority and the power to do something entirely different, and entirely more empowering – to themselves and to the child.

Four Things the Parent Should Do.

I define power as the ability to make something happen. In parent-child power struggles, each person tries to impose his will or resist the other's will, and make the other behave in a certain way. These tussles usually do not have a happy ending. In fact, they often spawn resentment and lay the groundwork for future power struggles which replicate earlier ones, with similar negative results.

Unfortunately, neither parent nor child wins a power struggle unless one of them gives in and lets the other one win. What good is that? Does it help or hurt the parent-child relationship? It's a win-lose proposition that often generates anger, hurt, and resentment. A power struggle is hardly the way to nurture a loving, harmonious relationship. So how should a parent approach the problem of parent-child power struggles? Here are four tips that will completely end this harmful process.

1. *The parent recognizes when a power struggle is starting.* "Here I go again. I'm getting into another power struggle with my child, and I don't like it."

2. *The parent takes ownership of the power struggles.* Who really is responsible for them? I think any reasonable person would say that, while both parent and child are equally involved in the struggle, the parent is the more responsible party. After all, the parent is far more experienced than the child in handling conflict, is probably more skilled in self-control and self-discipline, and carries enormous power and authority over the child in terms of controlling resources the child needs.

3. *The parent immediately accepts responsibility for putting an end to it.* I often say, and this is a good place to repeat it, that in *all* negative parent-child interactions, *the parent must change first*. This might require a bit of an attitude adjustment as well as the willingness to try some different techniques other than yelling, attacking, criticizing, and arguing when power struggles begin to flare up. Both attitude and technique are addressed in the following statements the parent could say to him/herself the moment tension begins to rise. I call this kind of self-talk *mental gymnastics*. With a little presence of mind, a lot of determination to rise above the fray, and repeated practice in the crucial moments, any parent can do some self-talk, or "mental gymnastics," and silently repeat one or more of these ten short statements before saying anything to the child.

"I'm not going to stoop to his (her) level!"

"This is all about ego."

"It's not worth it."

"Ending this is my responsibility."

"I'm going to rise above this."

"Time to show respect!"

"Great! Another chance to practice listening!"

"This is a test for me!"

Let's reflect on a couple of those ideas. The most obvious is that in engaging in an argumentative battle with a child, the parent is stooping to the child's level of immaturity. Immature, primitive, and assaultive forms of engagement are not the way humans best resolve problems. The best way to resolve problems is with dialogue.

What about ego? Ego, or what Eckhart Tolle calls "the little me," insists on looking good, being right, dominating, and having its own way. On the other hand, the Higher Self can step back and see this unfolding drama as a movie. It can observe the parent's ego about to get the best of him/her just as the child's ego is about to get the best of the child. Seeing it about to happen, the parent's Higher Self, the Observer, can step up and intervene—not by trying to control the child, but by actively taking the parent's ego by the throat and putting it in its place.

It always takes two to argue. One person can prevent an argument by simply saying, "I don't argue." *Love and Logic* has a cute phrase many parents like to use: "I love you too much to argue." By not stooping to the child's level, the parent effectively models the higher road, a more loving, more respectful way to treat another person when differences arise. And guess what! The child will soon start imitating the parent who consistently takes this higher road—the road that leads to harmony, mutual respect, and a loving relationship.

Power struggles are essentially a disrespectful way to treat a child—as if s/he were a pet, slave, or underling. They are demeaning to the parent, too, and most parents feel bad after allowing themselves to be pulled into one. The battle, really, is not between the parent and child, but between the parent's ego and Higher Self. The result of that battle predicts a positive or negative outcome between the parent and child in a tense situation.

Unfortunately, many parenting experts and authors talk about techniques "working" when parents gain control of child behavior. They often teach what I call "advanced warfare" methods to gain control such as by giving it up, by quickly and consistently imposing punishments, and by following through on threats. I call these approaches to discipline "Old School." While not all Old School methods are wrong or bad, many are disrespectful and ineffective—such as winning power struggles.

4. *In the heat of the moment the parent declares her intention to not engage, and expresses a willingness to listen.* After the parent has alertly stopped himself from an angry, knee-jerk response, he declares to the child, "I am not going to fight about this but I'm willing to discuss it when we're both calm."

The parent then has the responsibility to initiate the dialogue later. She *listens first, talks second*. This is my number one rule of thumb for parents in all situations where tensions are rising. I've described in detail the ways to do this in other places. Briefly, the model is this. *Listen first* means inviting the child to share his/her ideas by using the three listening techniques of acknowledging, questions, and reflecting. Subsequently, *talk second* means using the three illustrating techniques of modeling, honest and open communication, and using I-messages. Finally, this dialogue, which replaces the power struggle, results in some kind of agreement between parent and child. (See my various articles on listening, the "behavior dialogue," and co-creating agreements.)

Transformation of Conflict

I come at this whole thing from a different perspective than that held by Old Schoolers. Techniques "work" if they inspire a child to be cooperative and responsible, rather than merely obedient. Parents do not try to do the impossible—control their child's behavior, thoughts, or feelings—but rather use techniques that demonstrate respect and invite a child's cooperation. The parent uses personal power (ability to make things happen) cooperatively with the child, who thus learns to use power respectfully by copying the parent. This is nothing less than transformation of conflict into harmony.

Two Approaches to Parenting: Old School and New School

The single biggest problem that parents present in my classes and coaching is control of their children's behaviors. I should say, *mis*behaviors. So many children are resistive, argumentative, stubborn, rude, even defiant toward their parents. The parents' problem is that the parenting methods their own parents used with them (which may have actually worked quite well) simply do not work as well with many of these bright, articulate, independent-minded, but immature and self-centered children. What I call the Old School methods might, indeed, work well in many families, where the children are more easy-going and compliant. But in many stressed families, the Old School approach isn't cutting it. What's needed is a more sophisticated, more thoughtful approach. And I call it the New School approach to parenting. Here's a brief comparison of the two approaches.

The Old School Approach to Parenting

For eons, right up till today, the idea of parental authority in raising children has meant top-down authority, with the parents making rules, setting expectations, and demanding compliance or obedience from children. *This is not a bad model.* The paradigm, or model, for this approach can be summed up this way: 1) the parent has the authority and does most of the talking, including 2) establishment of the rules; 3) the child is expected to obey; and 4) the parent punishes resistance or disobedience in order to encourage compliance.

Parents Speak  Rules  Obedience  Punishment

As I said, this is not a *bad* model. After all, parents *do know better* than children how the home should be run, what proper behavior is, and what the rules should be. But in stressed families, or in stressed parent-child relationships, when commands and punishments are ineffective, this model tends to not work well.

Commands and punishments are often ineffective because children want their own way, and often do not like being told what to do. (I must say, I don't blame them—I don't like being told what to do either.) They have at their disposal highly sophisticated toys and influential networks of other children which stoke the fires of curiosity, independence, and autonomy within them. They often develop their own ways of resisting and defying parental rules and expectations, as they become more connected to the world outside the home, more savvy, more desirous of innumerable attractions, and more strong-willed than perhaps we were as children. They might evade their parents' guidance by getting caught up in sophisticated electronic games, the internet, cell phones, and other influences beyond their parents' reach. Finally, children who are angry at parents can show a remarkable—and frustrating—ability to be unfazed by a parent's punishments or deprivations.

For parents who are separated or divorced, and bearing the burden of being a single parent who might have enduring conflicts with the other parent, the challenge can be even greater. Their children are often confused, hurt, and resentful that their parents couldn't make it work, and feel to some extent abandoned by them. They are also immature, and easily find ways to play their parents against each other to get what they want. (Of course, children of positive mother-father relationships find ways to play them against each other too.)

So what are parents to do when the Old School model does not work well with their children? A new, more sophisticated approach to parenting that I call “New School” can be far more effective with strong-willed, independent-minded children who might also be angry. This is a more sophisticated model for parents to use in raising children, because it goes beyond the more primitive methods of inflicting punishments to coerce compliance. It can succeed very well where the Old School methods fail and when children don’t comply the way we expect them to. Why?

The New School Approach to Parenting

The reason this model can succeed where the older model fails is that the new one responds so much more directly to children’s innate need for control while not giving the reins of authority and ultimate decision-making over to them. It takes advantage of the children’s intelligence and desire for independence and ability to verbalize their wants and demands. It does this by completely changing the rules of the (parenting) game, and the expectations that parents have of their children. It looks like this.

Dialogue  Agreements  Cooperation  Accountability

The catch is that this new model requires that parents use better relationship skills with their children. In order to have meaningful dialogues with two-year-olds and teenagers (and everyone in between), parents need to use self-control and develop better communication skills. They need to do things like listening; refraining from yelling, threatening, and lecturing; using I-messages to express their values, expectations, and desires; offering choices; and, above all, negotiating agreements with children, then holding children accountable to what they agreed to.

In a New School approach, parents start with genuine dialogue with their children about expected behaviors and their consequences. (Yes, parents *really can* negotiate these things with two-year-olds! And even with kids who have ADHD.) Children (like adults) are much more likely to follow through on what they have had some control in setting up—in other words, they’re more likely to cooperate. And a New School approach prefers children’s cooperation to obedience. We want them to cooperate, and voluntarily *choose* to do work together with us. This is not a pipedream. It works.

But not always! Children (just like adults) will at times break their agreements. So instead of punishment, New School parents demand accountability: “What made you break your agreement? I take this very personally, because when I make an agreement with you, you expect me to keep it, don’t you? And that’s what I expect of you, too. Isn’t that fair?” Even young children know that’s fair. It’s the Golden Rule, which is the ultimate basis for all legal systems in the Western world.

A New School approach requires that we change our expectations of children: they *can* negotiate agreements in age-appropriate fashion if we are willing to take the time. It demands that we treat them with the same respect that we so ardently desire from them, and that we give to other adults: namely, we don’t just boss them around, or treat them like slaves or robots. It demands that we let go of our own egos a bit, and see our children as capable of thinking, of understanding, of being fair, and of being responsible. Then we are willing to put them to the test, and to lovingly, supportively hold them accountable when they fail.

My writing, my parenting classes, and my parent coaching are all aimed at helping parents strengthen the skills necessary to parent from a New School mind set. While it takes real effort and commitment, it can be done. And when done, it is effective, as hundreds of parents in my classes have reported.

Listening Is 90% of Communication. It's the Parent's Magic Wand.

We have two eyes and two ears, and one mouth. Four out of five of those organs are for taking information in, and one for putting it out. That's 80% right there! But listening is so powerful and so important, and so hard, that I throw in another 10%. This makes it 90% of the communication process. It is the most important relationship skill, and the single most powerful thing anyone can for anyone else in any relationship. For the parent, it is nothing less than a magic wand that will, if done well, transform tension into calm, conflict into harmony, and anger into appreciation. Why?

1. Listening is the *one and only thing* I have ever found that one person can do for another that is *never wrong!* Any other kind or loving gesture can, given the person and the circumstances, be wrong, offensive, or unwelcome. Not so with listening. Who does not want to be heard?
2. *One of the goals of listening is to understand* where another is coming from, to understand what he is trying to convey, or his thoughts and feelings. This is what constitutes *empathy*. And who doesn't want to be understood? Who does not want to be listened to? The biggest complaint people have about each other is, "S/he doesn't listen to me." So when I listen, I communicate, "I care enough about you to empathize and to understand where you are coming from." Who does not want to be understood?
3. And guess what! Listening actually *does create understanding*--understanding of where the child is coming from, especially their thoughts and feelings, why they say what they say, why they do what they do, even if I might not like it. This is all the more difficult when they think and feel differently from me.
4. *Listening is harder work than speaking*. It's much easier for me to shoot my mouth off than listen to someone else shoot *their* mouth off. It takes concentration to follow what they say, put myself in their place, and not interrupt, especially if I disagree with what I'm hearing, or if I think I know what they're going to say. I might feel I'm right, and they're wrong. I might think I must defend myself. When I listen, I let go of defending. I'll get my chance to talk later.
5. *Listening means I will be changed*. This can be threatening. If I truly hear and empathize with another, I will have my own views about him changed by new information. And I don't know how I will be changed. It means letting go of what I think in order to tune in to the other. It's like being in a rowboat and leaving my safe and familiar little mooring in the fog, knowing I won't get back to that same safe and familiar place, and yet not knowing exactly where I'll end up. This can be scary!
6. *I will hear things I don't want to hear*. My ego (my "little me") might say, "This hurts," or "That's not true." Listening might make me feel like I'm giving up, or giving in, or paying attention to nonsense, or being insulted. It takes courage. It's easier to defend my own position than to be influenced enough by another that I must now integrate a new perspective into how I see him or her.
7. *Listening takes time that I might not have*. So ego pipes up with things like, "I'm too busy and he talks too much. And he's not saying anything worthwhile anyway. I don't need or want to hear it. I know what he's going to say anyway, so it's easier to interrupt and get the whole thing over with. Why should I waste my time?"
8. *Listening is what enables you to say what needs to be said*. You obviously want your child to hear the important things you have to say. But how do you know what those things are? You really learn what to say by listening to what is being said. Instead of blurting things out or running off at the mouth, the parent who listens can respond to thoughts and feelings.
9. *Listening builds trust like nothing else can*. If I can listen to you without judging, criticizing, interrupting, defending, or belittling, you will learn to *trust me with your innermost truths*. Isn't this what best friends do? Isn't this what companionship, and even more, *deep friendship*, is all about? Isn't this the true act of love?

A good communicator's most important work is done with the mouth shut.