

The Listening Game (At Mealtimes)

THE LISTENING GAME CAN help you practice and teach good listening skills in your family. The game is a fun way to learn the Talker-Listener Card process and to improve your relationships. As you hear each other better, you'll deepen your understanding of each other and grow to care more as well.

People grow in healthy, cooperative settings. Your family can be a source and center of strength for all its members and everything else you each do in your lives will go better.

This is especially true for young children. This loving, listening environment will support their learning to work with others. And they can easily participate because they already understand taking turns and fairness from their school experience.

It's best to get agreement from your spouse before you try it. Incidentally, the game works as well for a gathering of housemates, friends, or co-workers at lunch as it does for families, and of course, buy in is necessary for it to work.

In the game everyone gets a turn to talk and no one else can spoil their turn by interrupting, arguing, changing the subject, or lecturing. (When a friend of mine read this part she said, *"But what else is there for a parent to do?"*) Youngsters love to catch their parents or siblings breaking rules. It may be harder for parents to play this game than for youngsters.

Start the game by telling your family that you've discovered a table game that's fun for ages 5 to 105. Show them the Talker-Listener Card and point out the Talker on one side and the Listener on the other.

Explain that everyone will get a turn to talk. They get to talk about anything that is going on with them and that everyone else has to listen to them. In this game, kids and adults are to graciously signal that they've caught a rule-breaker, someone who quit their listening turn and started talking, by simply turning the card around. No accusing, no attacking, just turning the card.

The rules of engagement

1. The youngest takes the first turn to be the talker. Then move in turn to the oldest. Anyone may say, *"Pass,"* and have a second chance after everyone else has their turn. Each person gets a turn to talk about whatever he or she wants, while everyone else gives their undivided attention.
2. Listeners play by using one of the questions below. Ask all questions with kind, friendly curiosity. Nothing pushy or unpleasant. Review the example here before you start so all listeners are on the same page.

The first talker looks at his plate and says, *"But, I don't like anchovies on my pizza."*

- Repeat as accurately as you can what you heard the talker say: *"So you don't like anchovies on your pizza?"*
- Put in your own words what you heard: *"So, you think you'll throw up if you have to eat any of that fishy stuff on your pizza."*
- Ask a question so you understand better: *"I didn't understand. Did you mean you aren't going to eat the pizza because it has anchovies, or that you will take the anchovies off so you can enjoy the pizza?"*
- Ask a question for further information: *"What would you like to have on your pizza instead of anchovies?"*

3. Begin by placing the card in front of the first talker with the TALKER side facing him or her. Everyone else sits on the LISTENER side of the card. This continually reminds everyone whose turn it is to talk and whose turn it is to listen. It may take a little practice to learn to tell the difference between talking and listening. That's part of the fun.

(Gently catching someone breaking into another's talking time is a way of learning the difference and respecting each other.)

4. The first talker begins. When someone else interrupts and talks out of turn, anyone can turn the card around so the TALKER side faces the rule-breaker.
5. The culprit who's been caught has to turn the TALKER side of the card back toward the one whose turn it was and say, *"Oops, goofed. It was your turn to talk. What were you saying?"* Or, *"Sorry, it was your turn. You were saying you don't like anchovies. Please go on."*
6. You may have to ask the talkers whether they are understood. (And notice, that's understand, not agree. Understanding is the basis of good communication.)

The talker's turn is finished when the talker says, *"Yes, you understand me."* Or, *"You got it."* Or, nods and mumbles, *"Un-huh."*

7. When a talker is understood, continue until each person has had a turn to be heard.

One family's example

Dad gets the game rolling with the kindergartner. *"Okay Sammy, it's always your turn to be the talker first. What do you want to talk about?"*

"Well, Jason took my crayons and my teacher didn't do anything about it."

Junior high Jeremy says, *"I hope you didn't go crying to the teacher. Nobody likes a crybaby. You should have punched him."*

Dad turns the card around to face Jeremy, who then says, *"Whoops, I'm caught. Sam, it was your turn. What happened...?"* Or, *"Sounds like it bugs you when Jason steals your stuff and the teacher doesn't believe you...?"*

Sammy sighs, *"Yeah. That's right."*

Mom says, *"So it wasn't much of a fun day...?"*

"No, but I liked lunch and recess. We got to play wall ball."

And Jeremy says, *"Is that your favorite game...?"*

"Yeah!" And that ends Sammy's turn to be the talker. To be sure, someone can ask, *"Have we understood you...?"* (When the talker nods and says, *"Yeah,"* or some clear indication he or she has been heard, turn the TALKER side to the next older person. This keeps one person from monopolizing the conversation.)

So now it's Jeremy's turn, *"I don't like it when you turn my music down."*

Dad says, *"You call that racket music!?"*

Sam catches Dad, and with a big smile turns the TALKER side of the card on Dad, who sheepishly says, *"You caught me. That's right, let's see, it was your turn, Jeremy. Let me try it again. So you don't like it when we turn down your music...?"*

"You bet I don't! It makes me mad. It's my music and I like it."

Dad, nearly choking: *"It's your turn, aaah, what do you like about your music...?"* And Jeremy gets to talk and be heard about his music, something that matters to him. When he is understood, his turn is complete.

Sometimes it helps to finish a turn if someone summarizes what the talker said before asking, *"Have we understood you?"*

Then the TALKER side goes in front of Mom. The kids say, *"It's your turn, Mom. What happened in your day that you want to talk about...?"*

"Nice of you to ask. I had a tough day. My boss wants me to do something I think is unethical."

Sammy, *"Does that mean he wants you to do something wrong...?"*

"Yes. And if I don't do it, I might get fired."

Jeremy, *"Boy, it sounds tough to be an adult. What are you going to do...?"*

When she has been fully understood, Dad gets a turn. The kids ask, *"Dad, what is going on with you...?"*

"When I come home from work, I'm so tired of people that I'd like a few minutes of quiet time."

Sammy, *"You mean you don't want us to bug you when you come in the door...?"*

Jeremy, *"What would you like...?"*

Dad, *"I guess what I'd like is a hug from each of you. Then I'd like to go to the basement for twenty minutes to putter. After that, I think I'd be ready to help with dinner, help with your homework, play catch, or something."*

Mom, *"So you need a break to unhook from a tough day at work...?"*

Dad says, *"Yep, that's it. You got it."* He feels understood. Game over.

Talk about miracles! What teenager ever asked a kindergartner about his frustrations at school? What father ever asked a teenager to explain the nuances in his music? What kids ever asked their parents about what's important to them?

(An informal historical search suggests that questions like these have been asked only seventeen times in recorded history. This simple mealtime game could possibly change the nature of civilization as we know it.)

Having a safe place to share and sort out our issues, where we are heard and acknowledged, makes for healthier and happier lives. You could add a wrinkle to this game by using it to discuss a family outing, party, work project, or misunderstanding.

When we play games that teach us to really listen and understand each other, our relationships can deepen as family interactions become more pleasant and meaningful.

The TLC with game rules can help a family crisis

When a family has learned these skills by playing the listening game, think what they can do when there's a crisis. The kindergartner comes home crying, *"Zeke threw rocks at me."*

Mom, instead of responding with standard "parent talk" and saying, *"I'll go call his mother,"* listens by asking, *"Were you scared? What happened...?"*

"Yeah, he almost hit me. We got into a fight over his bicycle. He wouldn't let me use it, so I took it."

"So you took it. What happened then...?"

Eventually, in her role as a listener, she could ask, *"What could you do that might help...?"*

"Well, I guess I could take his bike back and tell him I'm sorry."

This approach would hear Sammy and encourage him to figure out what to do about his situation. He would sense his mother's confidence in his ability to resolve his own conflict and likely calm down enough to think more clearly about his options.

Or, Dad meets Jeremy at the front door at 2 o'clock in the morning a few years later, *"You're late with the car!! You're grounded!!"*

Jeremy, *"Wow, Dad, you sound angry. You must have been really worried about me...?"*

"You bet I'm angry, you're grounded!"

"Were you scared something awful happened to me or are you more mad because I didn't get the car back when you told me to...?"

"Well, Jeremy, I was mostly scared, but I'm also upset you didn't do what I asked you to do. We love you and we don't want anything to happen to you. So what did happen?"

When a crisis erupts, the calmest family member gets the TLC, and sets it on the table. And the family caught by awareness, says, *"Oh, that's right. Let's see who talks first and who listens. We can get through this. Everyone gets a turn to talk, everyone listens, and that's fair. That's how we play the game."*

At one level, life is a game and when we learn to play by the rules of taking turns and really hearing each other, then everyone has a safe place to sort through their issues and handle their lives more constructively.

At a deeper level life is not a game at all. It is real. All the more reason why we need all the help we can get to live in this challenging and complex world. Learning together to listen to and support each other can make that world less scary and more possible for us to navigate wisely.

Best wishes as you consciously choose to learn together how to care more and support each other better.



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LISTENER

*I'm calm enough to hear
I don't own the problem*

GOALS

- To provide safety
- To understand
- To clarify

Without

- Agreeing • Disagreeing
- Advising • Defending

From: *Why Don't We Listen Better?*

TALKER

*I'm most bothered
I own the problem*

GOALS

- To share my feelings
- To share my thoughts

Without

- Accusing • Attacking
- Labeling • Judging

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