



Revolutionary Love Letters to Parents

Listen

From:

The Revolutionary Love Project

To: You





Listen

Dear Parent,

Do you remember that time—the 45th consecutive day you were late for work when your child threw their shoe across the room instead of putting it on as you asked? You'd already spoken to them in a calm voice 342 times. You gave them a ten-minute advanced notice. You've even offered a different pair of shoes. On the 35th day, you had to leave the room to scream into your pillow, and you didn't know what to do. Your child had become your most challenging opponent.

But something happened on that 45th day. Maybe the shoe, after flying through mid-air, hit that stuffed animal that sings Happy Birthday, and it made you chuckle, giving you just enough space to wonder about what was causing your child to throw that shoe every day—a slight return to wonder, what a blessing.

So, on the ride home from school, you ask, "You know how sometimes you throw your shoes in the morning right when it's time to put them on? I'm wondering why you do it." They pause for a moment, then answer, "Because I want to play with you in the morning." I'm sure you remember that time.

Well, I'm here to say you did it. You listened to your opponent, a vital and strategic act of Revolutionary Love. You know what your opponent wants—the world they desire: love, connection, and play. It looked like violence, especially the day the shoe almost hit the cat, but now you can tend the wound.

These small moments of listening to your children may seem miles away from listening to those who cause harm. But listening to children is potent training because it's easy to see the connection between their behavior and their wounds. We see them

as innocent and cute. We want them to feel safe expressing themselves. We witness how painful family systems cause them to act out. It's easier to listen to them because they are a part of us that we know deeply.

The civil rights activist and founder of the Belonging and Othering Institute, John A. Powell, encourages us to build bridges with people who are different and to start by practicing bridging shorter gaps. There is no smaller gap than between us and our children. Parenting is a perfect training group for listening to opponents.

Listening to our children may seem small (even though it isn't easy), but this life, this world, is made of small but complex moments like these. When you find ways to listen to your child, you model for them how to listen to others. You stretch your capacity to listen. You build peace one interaction at a time.

—With love, The Revolutionary Love Project Team

Defining listen

To listen to our opponents is to seek to understand them—not to change them, or persuade them, not to compromise with them, or legitimize them. Listening to our opponents preserves their humanity—and our own.

Listening is not just a moral act; it is strategic. Listening enables us to fight in smarter ways for justice—not only to remove bad actors from power but to change the cultures that radicalize them. This is how listening to our opponents becomes a powerful act of Revolutionary Love.

Ask yourself: When is it my role to listen? When am I emotionally and physically safe? When can I take on the labor of listening when others are not safe to do so? We can all be one another's accomplices.

“Deep listening is an act of surrender. We risk being changed by what we hear. . . Empathy is cognitive and emotional—to inhabit another person's view of the world is to feel the world with them. But I also know that it's okay if I don't feel very much for them at all. I just need to feel safe enough to stay curious. The most critical part of listening is asking what is at stake for the other person. . . . [Then] I ask myself, What is this story demanding of me? What will I do now that I know this?” (Kaur, 2020, p. 144)

“Our goal is to understand them. . . . In understanding the cultural forces that shape such a belief, and the institutions that embolden people to act on it, we can better focus on what we need to fight: not a few bad actors, but entire policies, platforms, and echo chambers that perpetuate supremacy. In order to create a safer world for all of us, we must not only defeat such opponents but invite them into transformation.” (Kaur, 2020, p. 156)

For more exploration of listen, get **the Revolutionary Love Project Compass guide**.

Practices to foster listen

Ask children questions about opponent's wounds

To help your child identify an opponent's wounds, you can reflect with them on the reasons for another's bad behavior. This teaches them to listen to multiple layers in others' experiences. For example, when a character does something harmful in a film, show, or book, you might ask why they acted that way. *I wonder what happened to make them do that?* You might also ask, *"Sometimes people or groups of people do harmful things when they want something, and they think hurting people might get it. I wonder what you think these people want?"*

When children report successfully navigating everyday conflicts, you might ask them something like, *"It sounded hard to listen to that person, but you did. I wonder what you did that helped you keep listening?"* This kind of question helps them reflect on and consciously build listening skills.

These reflections should not happen in the heat of the moment. If your child is angry or feeling wronged, it's time to move to creating a safe container for rage.

View conflict as valuable

Often, conflict is viewed as a problem or a sign that something went wrong. As we've written, it's a natural part of caring for one another. When we adopt the attitude that conflict is natural, it's easier to listen to our children and their wounds. We might even say to ourselves, *"This conflict is an essential part of my relationship."* This gives us the space to stop seeing conflict as a failure of our parenting so that we can learn what isn't working for ourselves and our children.

Talk about moving from rage to listen

After a disagreement, when you return to discuss what happened, narrate what you are doing using Revolutionary Love concepts. *I was frustrated, so I made a safe container for rage. I feel a little better now. I'm ready to listen. Do you want to tell me what happened?* This is a powerful way to experience and identify the practice in their lives. Once they become familiar with it, you might be able to rely on the practice in heated moments. *We are angry with one another. Let's make some containers for rage, so later we can try to listen to each other.*

Create a listening object

If you have family meetings to discuss ongoing issues, you might create a listening object—something the listener can hold to remind them that it's their turn to listen. It can mark a turn or exchange when decompressing and working out a conflict.

Place the object in a special place so that it retains sacredness and importance.

Appreciate listening

Share with your children appreciation for listening to their opponents, which could be when they listen to you, a sibling, or a friend, even though they don't like what they hear. *"Wow, I noticed how you listened to your sister even though it was hard. You listened, and then you two could make a new plan!"* Adults often take for granted when things go well, so children only get feedback when there is a problem—taking time to notice when listening works feels good and teaches children what works well so they can use the same strategy in the future.

Be mindful of your role in solving family conflicts

When adults act as judges, handing down verdicts in family conflicts, children will start to export responsibility for the conflict to adults. You'll begin to hear, *Dad, she took my toy...* When adults approach disagreement with wonder and by listening to all sides. From there, help engage the children to develop reparative solutions; children will start listening to one another independently. They will have practice and language for negotiation and see it as part of their communal responsibility.

Remind them that it's an adult's job to help if they are being hurt

When children are being hurt or abused, especially by adults, they often blame themselves. Relying on adults for care, it's easier to see oneself as the problem because it's less scary than realizing that you don't have an adult to protect you. If this is the case, children could misuse the practice of listening to justify abuser's actions. To safeguard against this, you can talk about the practice of fight, reminding them that it's adults' job to fight for the safety of children. If someone hurts them, it's time to get a grown-up they trust to help fight for them.

Children's books for listen

- **Adrian Simcox Does Not Have a Horse** by Mary Campbell— A little girl learns how to listen to the truth behind her classmate's lie to see the beauty of his imagination.
- **Hey Little Ant** by Phillip and Hannah Hoose— A dialogue between a child and an ant in which the ant makes a case not to be stepped on.
- **Listen** by Holly McGhee— A beautiful poem about listening as a way to connect oneself to the whole world.
- **I Forgive Alex** by Kerascoet and Sebastien Cosset— A wordless picture book about understanding and forgiveness.