

# Are You Listening?

By Bette Moore

Art Linkletter knew it well entertained millions with the “darndest things” that children say.

Therapists tell us that if you want to learn the truth about a family, you simply need to ask the youngest child.

ee cummings danced around the truth of it when he wrote:

the children guessed but only a few  
and down they forgot as up they grew

When the woman asked Kahlil Gibran to speak to her of children, he told her to “Strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.” He explains that the soul of her child dwells in the house of tomorrow, which she cannot visit - not even in her dreams.

Almost 2000 years earlier Jesus warned, “Unless you come as a little child you will not see the Kingdom of God.”

So why are we *still* so afraid to listen to the young? Why do we continue to discount their ideas? What investment do we have as a society to make sure they forget their innate wisdom and conform to our rules?

This is not a new subject. Scientists, poets, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, and journalists have studied it and have written volumes, but still, as a society, we refuse to listen to our children.

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It was a class of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders that taught me something about why adults in our culture find it very difficult to really hear what our children might have to say to us. The class was engaged in a lively discussion about a chapter in a book we were reading. For some reason the discussion became about how children interact with their parents and teachers. At one point a student who had not even raised his hand blurted out, “**Adults never listen to kids!!**” In one voice the class spontaneously agreed with him.

Well . . . being an adult who *prides* herself on listening to kids, I simply could not let this one pass! My comment was something like, “Whoa . . . what do you mean ‘never’? Why don’t you think we listen to you?”

It was one of those times a teacher dreams about. 100% attention! Every student focused as one. Everyone had an idea, and they all wanted to be heard. At once!!!

So I pulled out a marking pen and began writing on a large piece of chart paper on the easel I keep handy for just this situation. I accept absolutely every idea – one at a time, without comment – and record everything as quickly as I can. This time the ideas boiled down to just four:

### **Why Don't Adults LISTEN to Kids?**

“They think a kid doesn't have anything important to say.”

“They're afraid their kid might have a problem they can't solve.”

“TIME: They say, ‘My kid only wants to talk when I'm busy.’ ”

“When there's *finally* time to talk . . . nobody has anything to say.”

After I had captured those four ideas on paper, every other comment fell directly into one or more of the same general categories. The discussion continued for a while – mostly because I needed to learn more from them. As soon as they realized I was really interested in what they were saying – they didn't want to stop.

I also wanted to keep the discussion going because deep down I knew that they were right. I knew that from time to time I was as guilty as anyone else of discounting a child's ideas – if, perhaps, only unconsciously. And worse than that, I knew that underneath my confident “adult” persona, I was terrified that a child might have a problem I couldn't solve. What if a child were to express a need for help I could not give? Sometimes it is just easier to keep busy and unaware so we won't have to remember the pain of being little and helpless.

And, of course, there's the most common excuse of all: We tell ourselves that we don't have *time*.

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I once heard someone say that “LOVE” is spelled “T-I-M-E.”

I know that is true. The only way to develop a healthy relationship with another person is to devote *time* to that relationship. That's the lesson my fifth graders started teaching me that day, and it is the lesson we all need to learn.

Children know it. Let's stop teaching them to forget it before it's too late for all of us.