

Are You Listening?

By Bette Moore

✚ Art Linkletter's kids said the "darnedest things" and a whole generation loved listening to them.

✚ ee cummings danced around the truth 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 said, "Strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you." He told her that the soul of her child "dwells in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit - not even in your 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. It was a class of 5th graders that taught me something about why adults in our culture find it so difficult to really hear what our children might have to say to us.

The class was engaged in a lively discussion about interacting with their parents and teachers when one student announced: "**Adults never listen to kids!**" In one voice the class spontaneously agreed with him.

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 pen and began writing on the easel. In situations like this I accept absolutely everything they say – one idea at a time, without comment – and record it all as quickly as I can. It’s important to catch their thoughts as they come; there is always time to edit later.

It took a while, but pretty soon their ideas began to align around four basic themes:

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 these four ideas on paper, 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 had to say – they didn’t want to stop either.

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*.

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 take *time* to really listen. That's the lesson my fifth graders started teaching me that day.

Our children already know it. Let's stop teaching them to forget it before it's too late.