

# LEND ME YOUR EAR: THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

By Kayla Stevens

Think about the last time you noticed a child in your ministry who felt cared for and seen by an adult leader. Introduce me to that leader, and I can guarantee that you will be introducing a leader who knows how to listen. He or she may not make the best self-portrait out of pasta or arrive fifteen minutes early as requested, but that leader knows how to listen to a child.

The discipline of listening is a much needed and much neglected area of learning in our ministries. In the midst of delivering sound content, sanitizing our classrooms, and reviewing Bible skills, we can often forget that one of our most powerful tools as leaders is the ability to make space for active listening—not merely hearing what a child says while simultaneously thinking about our response. As leaders, we must remember that we are called to teach children, not lessons.

**Consider these opportunities as you leverage a listening culture in your classrooms:**

**LEGITIMIZE CURIOSITY.** Oftentimes, kids don't want to know the correct answer as much as they want a safe place to ask their questions. When a child comes to you with a question he or she could have asked Alexa, take notice that the child is not just looking for an answer. He or she is inviting you to help interpret and make sense of the reality of the world around him or her. Recognize the gift of that kind of vulnerability and lean into it. Look for opportunities to ask leading questions such as, "Can you tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_?" Verbally recognize the question and affirm a child's curiosity. (That is a great question. I have wondered about that, too!)

As leaders, we get to set the tone of creativity and curiosity. When curiosity is stifled, questions are silenced. But, when we give ourselves and the kids in our classrooms the opportunity to be curious, we invite questions that probe into deeper spiritual learning and development.





**LESSEN PERFECTION.** Allow kids to be wrong sometimes. If kids can't make mistakes about their faith at church, where can they? As we leverage a culture of listening to deepen connection and growth, we must lessen the ideal of perfection and right answers and lean into the process of learning. Consider responding to kids by asking deeper questions. (I'm really interested in what you have to say and I want to make sure I don't misunderstand you. Can you help me understand \_\_\_\_\_? I wonder what our Bibles have to say about that. Let's see if we can find out.) Be appropriately vulnerable with your class and give yourself, your kids, and your leaders permission to not have all of the answers or get it right all the time.

**LEARN TOGETHER.** Get excited about learning *with* kids in your classroom, not merely learning for them. Remind kids that you love their questions, even if you don't have the answers. (And give yourself permission not to have all the answers!) As we learn about the Bible alongside the kids in our classrooms, answers should not be our main goal of learning. Discovery should be. As we learn alongside children, we communicate that their questions are valued and they are not alone as they discover more about God. Learning together cultivates an active participation for children and gives them appropriate responsibility in owning their faith rather than receiving information from their leader.

If we want to maximize our impact as leaders, we must make room for intentional listening. As we cultivate an atmosphere where questions are welcomed, curiosity is encouraged, and mistakes are acceptable, we begin to listen not only to the questions, but also to the very hearts of children.

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