

3. Improving your listening skills

The following The Indian Model School tips will help you improve your listening skills so that you better understand the complainant's issues, perspective and feelings and can also make them feel they are being heard.

Things to try

- Focus your attention totally on the person and concentrate fully on what they are saying.
- Repeat conversationally and tentatively, in your own words, your understanding of the person's meaning.
- Give feedback on feelings as well as content by asking questions (as appropriate), such as, 'How do you feel about that?' or 'How did that affect you?'.
- Repeat information and give feedback to show that you understand and to enable the speaker to hear and understand their meaning.
- If your feedback is not well received, only try again if you can do so with tact and understanding.
- Be as accurate in your summary of their meaning as possible.
- Challenge feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness subtly. For example, if they say, 'It is hopeless', you might ask them, 'It seems hopeless to you right now?'. If they say, 'There's nothing I can do', you could question, 'You can't find anything that will help fix the problem?'.
- Allow silences in the conversation.
- People will sometimes indicate a shift in their attitude by changing their body position. A good response to such a body shift is to wait, then suggest, 'How does it all seem to you now?'.

Things to avoid

- Avoid talking about yourself.
- Don't respond with your own reactions or make well-intentioned comments.
- Don't ignore or dismiss the person's feelings.
- Avoid advising, diagnosing, baiting, reassuring, encouraging or criticising.
- Avoid thinking about what you will say next: think about what they are saying.
- Avoid parroting the person's words or only saying 'mmm' or 'ah hah'.
- Don't pretend that you have understood if you haven't (ask for clarification).
- Avoid letting the person drift to less significant topics because you haven't shown you have understood.
- Avoid fixing, changing or improving what the speaker has said.
- Don't change topics.
- Resist filling every space by talking.
- Don't neglect the non-verbal content of the conversation.