April Dinwoodie: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time Podcast, Effective Communications. I'm your host April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom based training, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom on effective communications. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home, transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome Lynn White Dixon. Lynne is a therapist, foster care and adoption specialist, a former social worker and analyst for Monterey County Department of Social Services, and is currently in private practice, specializing in work with foster youth and adopted children and their families. Welcome to the podcast, Lynne.

Lynne White Dix...: Thank you April. I'm glad to be here.

April Dinwoodie: Great. Well, this podcast is all about effective communications, but I'm going to start with a question about listening. Can you describe both authentic listening and active listening for us?

Lynne White Dix...: Sure. I'm so glad you're starting with the question about listening because listening is the foundation of good and effective communications. The key to both is that you're engaged with the person talking and showing an interest. In active listening, the listener's primarily gathering information and repeats what the speaker has said or may be feeling. For example, if the child looks sad and says, no one plays with me at recess, the adult can respond by saying, it sounds like that makes you sad and hurts your feelings. If the child yells, I hate math and I'm stupid, the can parent respond with it sounds like math is hard for you and maybe you feel you're not smart enough to get It. Authentic listening conveys an attitude of genuine caring, curiosity and openness. When practicing authentic listening, the listener is fully present and listens without interrupting the speaker.

It is so easy in our busy lives to be distracted by the phone or the long list of things to do, but children know when we are only half listening. For example, to demonstrate genuine caring, you can sit with the child on your lap or kneel to their level or hold their hand. Your facial expression would be relaxed, but curious, and your tone own would be matter of fact and calm. You'd be looking at the child, even if they may not be looking at you and you invite the child to tell you what's going on and then just listen. As you can see here, this does not involve a robotic or repetitive response. Instead, there is warmth and understanding conveyed in their voice. Authentic listening stays away from judgment by not asking why questions or making should or should not statements. The listener listens for the feeling underneath the speaker statements and validates those feelings.

April Dinwoodie: Oh, such good examples, Lynne, thank you so much. And why is authentic listening so important?

Lynne White Dix...: Authentic listening is very valuable, especially for children who you are parenting, as it builds trust and attachment and allows them to open up. With authentic listening, you're focusing on what the child is feeling and through your tone, facial expression, and verbal response, you're sending the message, I understand and I'm sorry you are having or had that experience or feeling.

April Dinwoodie: Great, Lynne. Thank you so much. Now, can you describe the importance of open communication with a child about their past?

Lynne White Dix...: Well, we all carry our past around with us every day and that is different for children. Sometimes it's front and center and they let you know, and sometimes it's playing in the background. Either way, open communication helps children make sense of the past, helps them heal from negative and traumatic experiences, and builds trust and attachment with their caregiver. Many parents believe that if they talk of about the child's past, especially if the past involves a traumatic event or loss, that they are hurting the child or make him or her feel sad or upset. However, this is not true. When we are open with children about their past losses, we are communicating that we care about them no matter what happened to them in their past. We're communicating that talking about hard, sad things is okay and not to be afraid or ashamed. For example, say the family dog dies and your child with many losses in their past was very close to the dog.

By acknowledging that the child's sadness about the dog can be even harder because of the other losses they have had, or may make them think of people from their past that they have lost and how that is okay, and that you understand that's how they feel. This validates the child experience and may help them to tell you more about their feelings and their past experiences. I had this experience recently with a nine year old and with this prompt, she went on to share about her past losses, neglect, and abandonment, which she had not shared with her parents since coming home five years ago. Her parents were able to validate and normalize her feelings. And she experienced some healing of her grief, which brought her even closer to her parents. By talking about the past with the child without judgment and with authentic listening, you're helping to process feelings of sadness, hurt anger and fear. Expressing these feelings in a healthy way can be extremely beneficial. Being open about the past also helps the child view their life in a more healthy and holistic way versus in pieces or parts.

April Dinwoodie: Lynne, I could not agree more. And I always think there our age and developmentally appropriate ways to share even the most challenging information. What are some practical strategies to develop open communication with children?

Lynne White Dix...: Yes, April, when we're talking to children, we need to think about their age and developmental stage. And for children who've experienced trauma in the past often their stage and developmental age may differ. However, for very young

children, you might want to use words such as owies on your heart when talking to them about being sad or situations that make them sad. School-aged children who have a wider feeling vocabulary may understand words like angry, hurt, disappointed, and afraid. However, when talking to the child, using the words they may use when describing their feelings or experience, can be very helpful in deepening their understanding and connection with you. Some additional practical strategies include modeling open and easy communication with other parents and or adults, so children can see how you talk to others and you are giving them examples of open communication. You want to not place adult perspectives on the child and work to maintain an understanding of the child's view or perspective.

What I mean by that is that you're thinking about the child's age and what their experience has been to date and how they may perceive an experience as opposed to looking at it from the adults view who's had more life experience and have an ability to do more abstract thinking and reasoning. And of course, maintaining a curious and open attitude and a matter of fact, even tone of voice is a real helpful strategy. One of my suggestions on that is using words and tone like I'm wondering if in finishing that sentence, or I'm curious about how you came up with that I idea. So you're engaging the child to talk with you with a very even and matter of fact tone.

April Dinwoodie: This is all so helpful, Lynne. Are there additional practical tips that you can provide to parents in having conversations with children?

Lynne White Dix...: Well, one thing is to realize that children may be more open in their communication when they are involved in doing an activity with the parent, or sometimes even riding in a car. Sometimes the best conversations happen in a car when the child isn't looking at you face to face. Some ideas might be starting a conversation or making cookies or slime, or maybe when you're playing catch or shooting hoops in the backyard, or even giving each other pedicures. These could be way ways of having a communication and helping the communication flow because there's an activity going on and somewhat of a distraction and allows the child to pace how much they want to share. Just remember, we don't want to talk too much or too long and observe when the child has had enough and let the child lead the of the conversation.

April Dinwoodie: Again, Lynne, such great practical tips and tools, but let's go a little bit deeper now. Why is effective communication even more critical for children you are parenting who have experienced trauma, loss, or separation?

Lynne White Dix...: Well, effective communication can help children heal. It does help children heal. It lets children know that their feelings and experiences are important and they deserve to be listened to and respected. Being treated in this way is often a new experience for children who've experienced trauma and loss. Open communication conveys the message of you are worthy and you matter, and this is a key message for children who've experienced trauma and loss. They

need to hear this over and over again until they integrate it and can improve their self-esteem and feelings of being lovable and worthy. Also, effective communication allows children to process their experiences and feelings about their trauma. This can help them make sense of their experiences and decrease feelings of shame and guilt.

April Dinwoodie: Now, can you provide some examples of things that may be difficult for children to talk about?

Lynne White Dix...: Sure. That's a really good question. Experiences or incidents where they were harmed or deeply disappointed by people that were responsible for taking care of them or parenting them can be very difficult for children to talk about. Children may not want to discuss, for example, seeing their birth parents fighting and hitting each other. The child may not want to think about it because it brings back scary memories or it also may bring up feelings of guilt or shame. If they feel that the fighting was because of something they did or said, they have additional feeling of responsibility. They also may feel guilt because they couldn't stop their parents from doing what they were doing and may have believed they should have been able to do so.

April Dinwoodie: Lynne, based on our conversation, we know it's important for children to talk about these things, even if it's painful. What are some tips for talking with children in your care about sensitive and painful issues?

Lynne White Dix...: Well first, the parents need to know what's in the child's story and get familiar with the possible sensitive and painful issues that their children in their care may have experienced, so they can manage their own emotions about this information and talk in an even and empathic manner without being upset and angry in their tone. For instance, if the child was sexually abused, and that is often a really hard one for parents to get through emotionally, we all get triggered by it, but basically becoming familiar with that information and start thinking in their head words they could use to talk to their child about this and also messages they can give themselves, so they don't keep that anger that they may have and have that get triggered when they're talking to the child.

As a child shares these challenges, the parent needs to listen and validate possible feelings they may share or prompt possible feelings they could have, such as saying that sounds scary. Or if that happened to me, I'd feel sad, scared, or confused, whatever the feeling may be. Continuing with the kid who witnessed their parents fighting, you might say, wow, that must have been really scary to see and hear that. I would've been scared. This is done with an empathic facial expression and voice tone. Be genuinely interested in what the child has to say and validate their feelings about the experience as well as the feelings that may arise about talking to you about the experience here and now.

April Dinwoodie: These are also important, Lynne. Thank you. And we know that 75% of the messages we are conveying are communicated non-verbally. With that in mind,

can you talk specifically about non-verbal communication as an important element when communicating with children who have experienced trauma?

Lynne White Dix...: Sure. It is the non-verbal communication that the listener pays attention to and uses to determine if the verbal communication is authentic and believable. For children who've experienced trauma, they have become often hypervigilant and so they're constantly watching what the adult does. Children who've experienced trauma and have challenges with trust or believing adults, non-verbal communication can be a key to building that trust and connection. Non-verbal behavior such as holding the child's hand, rubbing their back, rocking them in a rocking chair, coupled with a kind, gentle tone, a neutral or empathic facial expression, and being in close proximity can help the child feel soothed, calmed, and cared for.

Also, since children experience trauma through their senses, healing occurs through those senses, so non-verbal communication uses techniques that connect with the child's senses and thus aids their healing. Engaging with the child in sensory based activities when talking with them, such as playing with Play-Doh or listening to music, and you have a loving facial expression, or sometimes just sitting close together and reading a book helps create a sense of safety and trust, which aids in healing and understanding. And it was all done non-verbally. No words were shared.

April Dinwoodie: Lynne, this has been such an important conversation filled with so many practical ideas. Thank you so, so much for this. I know that our listeners will find it very, very helpful.

Lynne White Dix...: Well, thank you April. I truly enjoy doing it.

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