

First, Seek to Understand

Why Should I First Seek to Understand?

I was recently asked, “Why is it so important to seek to understand? Is there some deeper meaning behind it all? Is it really a simple skill but sometimes hard to implement?” These questions are common as we are learning and teaching Self-Government skills in our homes.

Seeking to understand is critical for teaching self-government and trying to help a person’s heart change. I find that, often, when the TSG system is ‘not working’, it is because this critical skill is being overlooked. And, though the skill is truly simple, old habits of interaction can make it difficult to implement on a regular basis...meaning that we must consciously choose to develop the habit and skill of seeking understanding first, before teaching, correcting or even giving consequences.

When parents seek to understand first, they can teach or correct or give negative consequences without turning it into a personal thing (“I’m doing this TO you”). Instead, with understanding first, any instruction, correction, or consequences are given with the feeling of, “I understand you. I know it’s hard. Let’s work on this together.”

Understanding first, changes the tone of everything. It is not one family member against another family member, but instead it is family members working to overcome something together. There is a connection that can happen when a person feels understood.

Understanding Anxieties that Drive Behavior

We all want to feel understood. Every person wants that. I know that every child, especially teenage ones, want understanding. They want their parents to really get it, to know what they want, even to feel their anxieties.

We all have anxieties. Every person has worries and concerns whether they are social or personal, or even financial. (For example: If you understand that your husband has anxiety to meet some financial obligations for the family and that’s why he’s been a little bit short tempered with you lately, well then it’s a little bit easier to be compassionate when things aren’t going according to your ideal. I mean, there is just so much benefit for you to just acknowledge that they can have anxiety.)

Every single one of us has some amount of anxiety over different things. Children, however have even more anxiety than we do because they are not in as much control of their lives.

Now, can they control their own hearts? Can they control their own behaviors? Sure, absolutely. But they don't control, lots of times, whether they get to eat or not or whether they get to go play with friends or not, whether they get to be on the computer or not. All these things that they want to do, they don't always get to be in control of. When a person feels understood, things can calm down in their hearts and minds.

When Porter was three years old, he came to me one day when I was cooking in the kitchen and he said, "Mom, can I have a sippy of water?" and I did not respond to him at all. I did not show him that I understood him. Instead I just sat there and stirred the pot that I was cooking and I was zoning off somewhere else. My mind was not ready to have a conversation.

All the sudden I heard crying and it snapped me out of it. And I looked over to the top of the stairs in my house and there was Porter crying and those words that he had said before were still floating in the air and I was able to grab them. And I knew already that he was at the age where whenever he says anything, he wants mom and dad to repeat it back because then he'll stop saying it over and over again. That's what little children do. That's how they know you understand them is if you repeat it back. So I walked over to him and I sat down next to him, looked into his little eyes, and I said, "Porter, I know that you want a sippy of water and you think that I didn't hear you." Just saying that one phrase changed his whole countenance. He was instantly calm, his eyes were calm, his breathing change to being calm, and he got a little smile on his face. I mean that's all it took. Just to be understood made him feel calm. And then after that I apologized for not listening before, got him a sippy of course, and told him that I would try to listen better next time.

I got to see the instant change in him when he felt understood. From stress and anxiety to calm, because that is what happens. So whenever I think about seeking to understand, I think about trying to put myself in somebody else's shoes. Trying to envision how they must feel, how they could be processing this, what anxieties they might have. And whenever I try to put myself in that position, I can't help but go back in time a little bit to the way I used to process.

Now I don't know if you're able to do that but I can pretty easily, and I don't know if it's just some gift from heaven or something, but I can go back and remember how I processed when I was an out of control teen. I can remember exactly how I processed and what my anxiety level was when I was having arguments with my brother when I was a little girl. I can still vividly remember all of that stuff. So that's where I will put myself sometimes just so that I can remember this is what they are feeling in this particular circumstance when mom is talking to them about something or correcting them about something. This is what they are worried about.

Try This to Prepare Your Heart To Understand First

I think it would be beneficial, even if you have done it before, to take a moment and close your eyes and get a picture of yourself when you were young. See if you can see yourself and feel your feelings of anxiety. Then see yourself into a circumstance where you had an argument with your parents. Where

they were upset at you and you were upset at them. It's that one argument you will never forget. Probably because you know you were in the wrong for a lot of it. At least that's how it was for me. Think. See if you can feel what it was like that they did not understand. As trivial as it may seem now, what was it that you wanted them to get or understand? What did you say to them to try to make your point come across? What did they say to you? What were the looks that you were exchanging with each other? What was the feeling inside of you? You really have to remember that because that is the place where your children get at frequently nowadays. It may not be to that level because that was your worst one, but with each other they could be getting in that place, with friends they could be getting in that place. There's so many different circumstances where our anxiety level is different. We need to know and remember what that was like.

What My Childhood Anxiety Was Like

For me, it's like this ball of frustration that's inside because I am smart and they didn't understand. They didn't acknowledge my intelligence. They didn't ever let me know that the thoughts that I had could even be listened to.

This is the reason that after you and your child are calm, you need to discuss the situation with your child. The calmness has to be there, but the discussion should always happen.

But the story that I always remember is this one that I am not proud of. It's the worst moment I think I probably ever had as a child. But I wanted to go somewhere with a friend. They invited me to go somewhere cool; I can't remember where it was. It's funny that I don't remember those particulars but I do remember the argument. I asked my mom if I could go. Well, I probably didn't even ask her. I probably was really saucy and just said, "I'm going to be doing this" and then she probably said "Actually, no you're not." So she gave me a "no" answer and I was not okay with it. She was standing on the porch. I was standing right below the porch and we were arguing in front of the whole neighborhood. I remember popping off to her and just saying an awful thing, trying to put her in her place because I thought I was so smart. And then I remember her smacking me across the face and saying, "Don't you ever talk to me that way again!"

And then I remember feeling that frustration just welling up inside of me so deep and I was so angry. And I did something I had never done before, at least to an adult. I probably hadn't done it since I was a wee toddler. All of the sudden, I just smacked my mother across the face and I said, "Don't you ever hit me again!" I had bought into the lie that is frequently circulated socially that children have rights and that they don't need to obey their parents and that their parents can't really tell them what to do or what not to do. So I felt very justified in smacking her across the face because she had hit me. I also felt shame, instant shame. I knew that I had done the wrong thing. And later that day, my father came home. He didn't really seek to understand me either. None of us did seek to understand each other. He just hit me across the face and said "don't ever hit your mother again" and gave me a nice tongue lashing.

Anyway, that's the moment I always remember. My worst childhood memory. And I always remember that moment because I remember how much rage was inside of me. How much frustration that I had that I couldn't explain adequately to my mother that I really wanted to be included with this friend, that I felt like I did not need my parents to tell me what to do. Now, all of these ideas are flawed. Really, that those were even my top priorities is messed up. However, I had thought and felt these things and now my mother was stepping in and telling me that some of my core teenage beliefs didn't matter to her and that just really bothered me.

Understanding First With Calmness Makes All the Difference

Now, I want to contrast this story to a story that happened a while ago with my daughter. There was a time when my daughter Paige was caught in a lie. She had told a lie because she had wanted to do something that she thought we wouldn't want her to do. She knew it was wrong and she told a lie anyway. When I realized she had told a lie and that she wanted to do this thing for social reasons or curiosity or whatever it was, I had to tell myself, as I was thinking about it, that I had to try to understand why she, who was always honest (sometimes to a fault) would lie about this. I had to consciously not villainize her, but really, truly try to understand.

And as soon as I put myself in a place of "ok I need to understand," then I was able to be calm. When I got calm, we were able to have a lovely conversation about it. She had to explain multiple things to me, probably in multiple different ways because I kept asking questions. Paige is very deliberate because I've kind of trained her to be that way so we had a very deliberate conversation. Even in places where she said "What point are you getting at here, mom? What do I need to do to assure you that I'm not going to do this again?"

I think about the tone or feeling in that conversation in comparison to the feeling or the tone of the conversation that I had on that front porch step with my mother when I was a young woman. They are drastically different. Drastically! The situation with my daughter was handled so much significantly better that in the end, we understood each other more. She was motivated more to fulfill her role and to make the positive changes in herself because I reminded myself to understand and because that reminder to understand led to calmness.

Seeking to understand detaches you from a situation which leads to calmness. If you can get yourself emotionally away from what has just happened, then you can be calm and actually deliberately talk about what it is and have it be a productive conversation. Seeking to understand also calms them. So it calms and connects both the child and the parent. In a marriage, it would calm and connect both husband and wife. It shows that you value them; it shows you have concern for them. Empathy, that you are caring. It softens both of your hearts. When you seek to understand your children, it makes you their advocate and if they see you as their advocate, then they can trust you.

You see, that's kind of how it works with God. So we have a Savior, in my faith anyway, who is our advocate. He is the one who understand everything. He knows our weaknesses, He knows our

strengths. He wants the best for us all the time, which means that sometimes there are negative consequences that He allows to happen to us because of our choices. But all the while, He is advocating. Sometimes even those negative consequences are some of the ways He advocates for our change of heart. We have to be same with our children: constantly understanding, valuing, seeing the potential, focusing on where the person is going and not where they are necessarily at. So choosing to have an advocate type personality, that connection with the child, and then also advocating in ways where they learn cause and effect and learn from negative consequences sometimes.

Being an Advocate

The other day, my 12 year old son told me a lie because he obviously thought he might get negative attention if he told the truth. I gave him another opportunity to speak the truth. He didn't do it. He just didn't want to admit he had made a bad choice. Finally, I said, "What you really mean to say is.....you just don't want to say it, because you think that I will think bad of you, but I won't, so just speak the truth."

Instead of getting upset, or choosing to let it be, I chose to show him I understood what was inside him. I spoke for him, and showed him that it was safe to speak the truth to me. Then he smiled and wanted to speak the truth. It's OK to assume sometimes if it is in an effort to show your child that you understand. If you mess up in your assumption, that is OK. They will set you straight and then you will understand more anyway. After you really understand, then you can make a plan for how to help your youth conquer another temptation or behavior. **Seek to understand your child before you teach.**

Understanding First is the First Step of Disagreeing Appropriately

"Imagine what our world would be like if EVERYONE knew how disagree appropriately."

Understanding first is the first step to Disagreeing Appropriately. This is a very mature style of communication. Many adults can't do it. I suppose I should say that they haven't ever learned how to do it. (To learn how to disagree appropriately see the book, "Parenting: A House United", by Nicholeen Peck, or the Teaching Self Government implementation course.)

When people take the time to show that they understand the other person's view before telling their side of the story, they automatically give a message that they don't want to offend, they want to work as a team, and they want to share extra information that the other person might not have with that person. It suggests concern. If you show concern for the person you are talking to like this, your opinions are more likely to be HEARD.

What is Seen and Not Seen

I read an essay one time written by Frederic Bastiat called, "What is Seen and What is Not Seen." It is a political economy essay. Fantastic! I love it actually. But later on in life, I was reading in my Bible and I read in 2 Corinthians 4:18 KJV

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen : for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Now I knew where Bastiat got the idea! He was reading his Bible and he went "Wait a minute! This 'what is seen and what is not seen' principle applies to economics; it applies to politics, to government." To all truth there is the temporal manifestation to something and then there is the eternal, deeper understanding of what is going on with the situation, with the economy, with a person. And I loved seeing that he got that out of the Bible because I think he is a great thinker.

It is true that with each of us there is what is seen and what is not seen.

We have to see the condition of the heart. That is often what is not seen. Honestly, it is the easiest thing to feel. It is easier to feel a condition of a heart than it is to even feel emotional about somebody's behavior and their outward stuff. You feel that condition of the heart before you even focus on the outward generally. At least, that's what I do.

We absolutely must seek to understand the heart. If we don't seek to understand the heart, then we cannot touch that place. We cannot calm them. We cannot bring them truth.

When you seek to understand another person, essentially that is what you are doing. You are trying to see: Where is their heart on this? What are their worries and concerns? How is this affecting their progression? You are asking yourself some kind of deep questions for them. And really those aren't even things that deliberately go through your mind all the time but you just look into them and try to feel what their heart might be feeling and worrying about at the time.

I absolutely love the story of Gandhi. When I think of the story of "What is Seen and What is Not Seen", I always think of the story of Gandhi and the little boy who is addicted to sugar. So there was a little boy and he was addicted to sugar. His mom brought him to Gandhi because his health was getting so poor because he wouldn't eat anything but sugar. And she said, "Gandhi, you need to tell my son to not eat sugar" and Gandhi instructed her to come back in a month. She was a little frustrated about that because they had made the trip there and everything. So she left and they came back in a month and she said "Here we are" and Gandhi said "Don't eat sugar" and the mom said, "What? Why didn't you just tell him that a month ago? Why did we have to come back a whole month later?" Gandhi said, "Well, a month ago I was still eating sugar." That was a pretty huge moment. Gandhi actually totally put himself in the shoes of the boy. He did not feel like he could instruct him unless he knew what he felt like and he had not felt going without sugar before. And so he felt that it was something that he had to experience himself. I feel like that is what we are all doing, isn't it, as we are teaching our children self-government.

Aren't we all trying to be self-governing all at the same time? And we say to ourselves, "Alright, I'm governing myself. I'm feeling how difficult that is. I know it is hard not to explode. I am trying to focus on that myself." And then to say to the child, "You need to be calm. You need to choose not to think about that. Not to focus on the anxiety. Focus on the calmness instead." When you are telling him that or her that, you're telling what you have to do yourself on a regular basis.

Seeking to understand is a very pivotal principle to live by. If you live by the principle of seeking to understand others, you will constantly be changing yourself. You will constantly be calming yourself and preparing yourself as well as that other person that now feels understood. It's a hard skill to live, but when you do it, you will feel free. And you will feel like you have a deeper capacity to love people as well.

Additional Resources

Reflective Listening

- Reflective Listening Written Summary
http://www.donghanh.org/main/online/active_reflective_listening.htm
- (for giggles) Watch Phil Dunphy learn the power of reflective listening. Reflective listening is a communication skill that reflects the content and/or emotion of the speaker.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=95IAN1oeBk>
- Reflective Listening (good instruction if you need practice) (2 videos)
First - Instruction <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uRwwz-b6Zk>
Second - Demonstration: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oG_UIQrFmAY

Articles

- <http://parentingselfgovernment.com/article/my-child-wont-listen-me-parenting-tips>
- <http://parentingselfgovernment.com/more-about-disagreeing-appropriately-118>
- <http://parentingselfgovernment.com/im-hurt-mom-180>
- <http://parentingselfgovernment.com/christmas-sweater-213>
- http://parentingselfgovernment.com/the-power-of-a-hug_344
- <http://parentingselfgovernment.com/talking-teenagers-three-tips-904>

TIPS: Seven Tips for Conversing with a Reluctant Youth

1. Focus on how the actions effect the child, not on how they affect you
2. Keep your questions short and to the point (no lectures)
3. Bring the conversation back to the skill which they had a hard time with (in the case above it would be the skill set for accepting a consequence.)
4. Look them in the eyes (you need to connect with them to keep everyone calm and focused on the conversation.)
5. Describe what is happening and what it teaches you about parenting them more effectively. (or what the action communicates to you.) Keep focused on the point; which is to understand the situation and what motivates the person to change and learn.
6. Seek to Understand (Really care about what they are trying to tell you with their actions while still being firm and communicating deliberately.)
7. Give them a skill they can use to problem solve similar situations in the future. Practice the new skill.

Really Important Note:

If the youth will not stay calm in the discussion or will not look at you when you are talking then you should not continue to try to have the discussion. **The child is not ready.** They need to be

able to follow basic instructions like looking at you and be able to talk calmly and openly back to you.

I know for some youth this is very difficult, but they can learn in time. Ask simple questions and give multiple choice questions if they are not comfortable talking about their behaviors and emotions in order to get them going. Make sure they feel you are a safe person to talk to. Don't judge or laugh at them. Help them analyze and make a plan for the future so that they don't have to go through that experience again.

If the child starts raging again or has signs of an attitude problem describe their body language and then pre-teach them about what they are supposed to do to fix the situation. If they can't respect you enough to comply then tell them you can't talk with them about it until they are calm. Never talk to a child when you or they are not calm. It does no good.

Discussion Questions:

1. What did you agree with in the article? What did you not agree with?
2. Is it true that ALL situations require understanding first? Why or why not?
3. How much do childhood/youth anxieties factor into successful parenting?
4. In what ways do anxieties factor into your personal relationship interactions?
5. Do the anxieties really make such a big difference in your family interactions? In what ways?
6. Share some ways you view and handle anxieties of others.
7. When a situation calls for understanding first, what is your typical reaction?
8. What does it mean to you to be an advocate in you home?
9. What are your thoughts about how to get calm first to even be able to have an 'understand first' conversation? How hard is this? What techniques work for you/don't work for you?
10. Share what you are doing to increase your skill and habit of Understanding First.
11. If you watched the youtube training on reflective listening, share something you learned that relates to 'understand first.'

Possible Supportive Activities During the Circle Time:

1. If the Circle agrees and wants to practice/role play reflective listening, take a moment to review the steps and practice together
2. If the Circle agrees and wants to take a moment to make 'cue cards' to use the month for 'understanding first' & reflective listening, take some time to do this together.

Challenges:

1. Reflection/Journaling:
 - a. Examine your home environment --when things are tense and possibly feeling out-of-control (or the TSG System is 'not working') what is the root cause? When did the situation turn bad?
 - b. At what point could "understanding first" from you have changed the tone in the home?
 - c. Can you see where to stop the action and 'understand' first the next time things get tough?
 - d. Are you missing some communication skills that would help 'understanding first' be easier? If so, search in the internet and find the skills you are missing. This month consciously practice them. Make cue cards to carry in your pocket for

when times get tough and use them to master the habit and skill of understanding first.

2. Do the exercise described by Nicholeen in the article where you remember what it felt to have childhood/teen anxieties.
3. Consciously seek a time to have a “Seek to Understand First” conversation. Reflectively Listen to what your child, spouse or friend is saying. Notice what happens to your and the other person’s level of calm.