

“All I Really Need is a Hug” Top Ten Tips

You and your spouse come home from work at the end of a long day and start chatting while making dinner. You proceed to explain about your marketing (or PTA) meeting and how Joe in sales completely cut you off and then how Sally in advertising rolled her eyes at your idea and snickered. Your spouse asks what your idea was. You elaborate reluctantly. Your spouse looks doubtful and says *“Really?”*

“What do you mean?” you ask. *“What my idea was is not the point. The point is that they acted so obnoxiously. Why are you defending them?”*

And then you are off into a frustrating, less-than-helpful discussion about your idea, Joe, Sally, the whole marketing structure of the company and why are you in this job anyway when you have been complaining about it for years?

Most of us are primed to problem solve and when we see a problem from the outside with few details, the answer can seem so easy. *“Why don’t you just do this or do that or tell Joe to take a hike or change your idea...”*

Third parties can be annoyingly full of “solutions” but if it really were that easy, we would already have thought of it. The challenge is that generally we are not looking for a solution; we are looking for a sympathetic ear or an empathetic response. We would like to vent a little.

Our children feel the same way. Often when they come to us with a skinned knee, a tale of woe about their sibling or something that happened at school, all they are looking for is some acknowledgement, some validation and some empathy.

As parents, we want to fix things, make it better, resolve the issue. We feel it is our job to tell our children how to handle problems, to protect them from making any mistakes, or to take charge at the slightest opportunity.

By jumping in like this, however, we deprive our children of valuable learning opportunities, problem solving skills and self-confidence boosters.

When our children come to us with a problem, it is difficult to sit back and just listen and maybe nod once or twice. It is even more so to then maybe say something like *“Huh. You’re kidding? He/she said that? That sounds annoying.”* Not to mention asking *“What do you think you are going to do about it?”*

Here are our Top Ten Tips to help our children grow and learn long term skills when they come to us with an issue, a problem or a grievance:

1. Set aside distractions
2. Listen and wait. Nod and say *“hmmm, uh-huh”*
3. Match your facial expression to theirs – shocked eyes, wide open mouth, smile, raised eyebrows, pout, etc.
4. Ask for clarification, *“Really? She said that? He did what? Wow. Then what happened?”*
5. Realize that you are most likely getting an unrefined version of the story and most certainly a biased one. Stay calm.
6. Empathize. *“Ooh, that sounds unfair, upsetting, hurtful...”* Empathizing does not mean you agree with your child. (This is particularly helpful to remember when you are the source of the complaint) Validate and name emotions – embarrassment, fear, disappointment, anxiety
7. Give a sense of perspective *“On a scale of 1 to 10, how big a problem is it?”*
8. Ask what their plan is. *“What do you want to do about it?”*
9. Offer to brainstorm *“Do you need my help?” “Can I suggest something?”*
10. Offer comfort *“How about a hug?”*

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