

Listening in three directions

A dynamic and fresh way to be in a Focusing process

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Abstract: Listening in three directions is about listening to your own process, being aware of the interaction between you and the child and being aware of how the child is listening to his or her own process. The most important direction is listening to your own process. This allows the practitioner to have a full felt sense of the situation for him/her self and, at the same time, to have the capacity to develop and hold an objective hypothesis of what might be going on for the child. This way of listening brings theory and practice together, enabling the practitioner to hold a safe, non-judgemental space for the child, and to make rapid assessments as to what the right intervention might be to facilitate the carrying forward of the child's process.

Holding the felt sense of the whole situation

We live in a technological era, where, as a consequence of urbanization and the virtualization of our environment, little time is spent in embodied interaction with each other and the whole environment. Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit may help us to understand the benefits of being embodied in and with our environment. It is based on the idea that the organism is not to be conceptualized as an object or as a distinct entity, but rather as an interactional process that cannot be understood separate from its environment. The organism implies the kind of next step. Or, in Gendlin's phrase, carry forward. This is done through being in touch with the felt sense of the whole situation. At the same time, the environment may limit the possibilities of how the organism can carry forward, thereby eventually blocking the interactional process.

My experience informs my understanding that the body carries all the important information and answers for us. It's all in there but we may not always be connected with it. So, when I work with children of all ages, I stay connected with my own felt sense: building up safety, having clear boundaries and showing interest in whatever is there inside the child by reflecting many new and unexpected feelings, movements or non-verbal language, revealed by the child's behavior and posture.

I call this *Listening in Three Directions*:

- (1) Being first of all in touch with what is happening inside of me,
- (2) Being aware of what may be happening with the child's process and, through this,
- (3) Facilitating the child to listen what is happening inside of him or herself.

The more that I can be with this subtle step-by-step process, the more a child can build up their own inner and outer connections. I never know the next step. My basic attitude is always to step gently and consciously into this unknown and unexpected territory. This brings always a fresh experience, subtlety and joy to every connection with children and with adults.

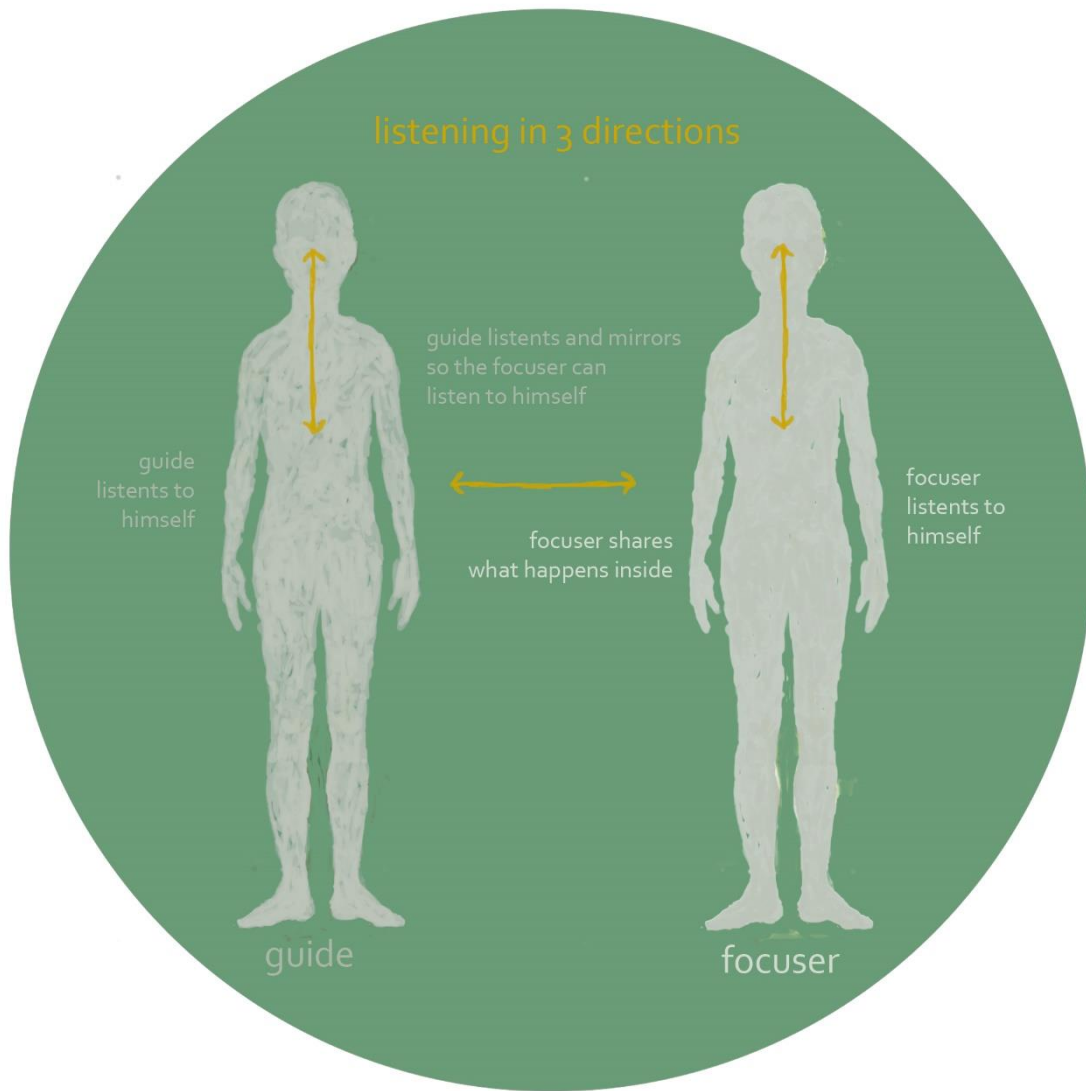


Image 1. Listening in three directions

¹ Thank you to Roos Rowaan for her illustration in this chapter.

I want to give two case studies to show how this *Listening in Three Directions* works in practice to support the unfolding of the unique process of each child/ teenager.

First Case Study: Nique and ‘Seeing Dead People’—how staying with your own felt-sensed hypothesis helps find the next step

‘I see dead people’, said a 14-year-old boy at our first session.

He had been described to me as having very low concentration and problems in making contact with others. His parents and teachers wanted to find out what was going on, as he doesn’t speak to them. They wanted to see how they might support him to learn as he had a lot of difficulties in this area.

The initial contact

After I explained how Focusing works and what might be the benefit to him. ‘You will get more bodily awareness, be more able to listen to what is right or wrong for yourself. ‘You will be more able to protect yourself from influences from the outside world and more able to relate to feelings and sensations in a way that you can move forward in school and in life’. I also told him that he will find his own unique style of expressing himself in a safe way.

The content of the first contact

He listened very carefully with a high level of concentration – more than 10 minutes in silence! He looked at me and suddenly asked me if I meditate a lot because he noticed something in me. I explained about my Focusing practice, how it is about being in touch with what is inside; I asked him what he noticed. He shared that he saw my aura with many different colours. I responded that I was touched and surprised that he has such an attuned awareness. I asked him if we might explore this together.

Seeing dead people

He suddenly started to talk for more than 15 minutes about his sensitivity. He picks up all kinds of emotions from others, he sees/ senses ghosts—angry ones, sexual ones, kind ones, and ghosts who want revenge. I reflected all this back to him. I saw that he was touched because it was the first time he had shared this. And then he said, ‘I also see dead people’.

My hypothesis

My felt sense was that it was important for me to explore all this with him, but without the necessity of going into the story for now (even if many questions and concerns arose in my awareness). My felt-sensed hypothesis was that he had many emotional layers inside, with much depth and that he was not able (yet) to express these or even relate to it. My job right now was to support him so he could find a way to hold and carry forward the process. I invited him to check how he might relate to all of IT, how his body was responding to this kind of experience or how his body might hold all this. He didn’t know his body so well, he said, but he was not afraid of the ghosts; it was much harder for him to relate to all the outside emotions from others.

Eager to explore

As we worked in this back-and-forth way my invitation to him was to listen to what he wants and to what he needed. He became more and more eager to work and to explore in this way: how might he recognize his inner feelings and emotions, being able to check if what he is sensing comes from himself or is coming from someone else? This seemed to be the crux of the matter. He wanted to explore how he could protect himself more from the influence from the outside and not from the ‘ghosts’. He felt so relieved because he now realized that he was feeling, more than anything else, pressure from others on the outside. There was so much going on inside that it was very difficult at first to distinguish inside from outside. But now, with listening support, he was better able to know what was happening.

At the end of our first session I invited him to check inside about how this exchange felt and within 2 or 3 seconds he said: ‘something is opening up in my chest!’. I was also touched by this—now I was aware of where in his body we might work together to explore more of his process. He now knows how to begin to listen to his bodily felt sense. We agreed to start to work together the following week. We also agreed that, with my support, he would tell his story to his parents. It felt like the process was no longer blocked. They were now more able to attune to his sensitivity and were more open to checking what he needed and what he wanted. Nique himself became much more aware of his bodily process—

when it was too open or too constricted. He learned how to protect himself from unwelcome outside influences and how to find a better balance in his interactions with others.

Listening in three directions in this case study

First direction: being in touch with what is happening inside me.

I listened to my own process and hypothesis – tentatively, always checking: is this the right way for his process? If I had gone down the road of exploring all about the ‘dead people’, I might have missed the important point, which was that this was not an issue for him, and not listened to him carefully enough. I would only have been listening in one direction—to myself.

Second direction: being aware of what may be happening with the child’s process.

By mirroring his words and gestures, I was inviting him to check if this was correct or if he needed to say more or if I had understood well. I paid special attention when he was touched or moved during his sharing, reflecting this with care and attention: this helped him to get more in touch with more of his emotional layers.

Third direction: facilitating the child to listen what is happening inside himself or herself.

He is now listening to himself, to his own needs, to how he might carry his process forward, how he can distinguish the inside and outside influences and how he can start to recognize his bodily felt sense of ‘all that’ (which felt more open now).

Listening in this back-and-forth way brings out a new perspective which, over time, we could begin to bring to his interactions with his parents and teachers and with his whole environment.

Second case study: Meeting our Secret Language— how letting go of questions generates trust.

A mother and her 11-year-old boy, Leo, who had been diagnosed with ADHD came into clinic. This was my first meeting with him, and the initial moments were, as always, quite telling. I learn that he is not able to express himself, has low self-esteem and is sometimes very angry.

The content of the first session

A real secret language

As I described my way of working and how he would not have to express or explain anything, there was a clear recognition in him, of some welcome permission *to just be*. As I spoke about how there can be many experiences inside us that don’t have words or might not want to be expressed at all, he adopted a swaggering attitude while suddenly saying, ‘there are many flies in my head who are becoming a thunder storm and inside I have a REAL secret language’.

I noticed he was challenging me to be drawn in to asking questions about his secret language. Declining to be drawn in by this challenge, which could have led to a ping-pong of words, I responded simply by mirroring his attitude back to him that there were ‘those two things inside — flies in your head and a thunder storm. As I invite him to check inside if one, or maybe both, of those needs some attention’, and how it might want to be expressed — and added could be done even if he wanted to sit in a corner privately — he gives me an honest smile and begins to draw very intensely.

An unfolding process

I do nothing obvious while he draws, just being there fully and sometimes mirroring what his hands are doing. Mostly, I am accompanying his process in silence. More than 20 minutes pass in silence and I can see visible signs of him relaxing. His process slowly came to a natural end and he looked at what he had expressed. I articulated only that, ‘this is what wants to get out on the paper . . .’. Just check if it needs some attention?’ He looked at me, then back at the paper and described how he had drawn his ‘secret language’ as if it were all kinds of small lines and dots drawn in a structure of small separate parts. Again, I do not ask what this means, only reflecting that, ‘this is really your secret language and it came out on the paper’. I invited him to ‘just check inside if there is more . . .’ or even to check, ‘how it is that this secret language is expressed in your own unique way?’. I am not, at this stage, asking what his expression means or the content of the ‘secret language’, simply letting him check inside if there is any change as he expresses this. With a huge smile he closed his eyes, saying out loud, ‘everything is outside, my head is so calm, the flies are gone’.

Carrying forward

He wanted to write more of these ‘secret stories’ and towards the end of the session I explained to his mother that it was important both to offer space for his expression and for now, not to ask about the secret language. His mother said that she was really happy that her son could express himself so calmly and agreed not to ask him about the secret language. In the following sessions, we continued in this way, and after some time, Leo learned to be better able to order his thoughts, his feelings and his impulses as he was now able to identify them for himself, using his ‘secret language’. In this way, his process was being carried forward and he was learning what the best interaction with the environment was for him. His mother, was also able to support this process, and, instead of asking him questions about what was bothering him, she was able to contain his process and provide a supportive, silent presence.

Listening in three directions in this case study

First direction: being in touch with what is happening inside me.

I was aware that he was, in some way, teasing or challenging me to see if I would make him explore his ‘secret language’. I felt that this would not be the way to go for now and I did not rise to his challenge, simply offering an open, silent space, waiting until he was ready to share. While he was drawing, I sensed what the right distance from him was, not looking at his drawing and respecting his privacy and his space. This is perhaps the most difficult skill to embody well as it asks me to be at ease with my own *uncomfortable-ness* and any underlying need to make the process flow as I want it to. So, my process is mostly pausing and waiting at the uncertain edge, while listening for whatever the next step of *rightness* might be.

Second direction: being aware of what may be happening with the child’s process.

This is about mirroring only the words that he mentioned—‘the flies in his head’, ‘the storm’— and acknowledging that there was *something* important in his secret language, while non-verbally showing in how I was positioned that I was respecting his space, occasionally checking if where I was situated was still ok with him.

Third direction: facilitating the child to listen what is happening inside himself or herself.

He was now listening inside to the experience of his body, he was creating silence and space for that and exploring his unique way or ordering what was inside without having to explain all the details. Questions would have put him under pressure.

Summary

Listening in three directions: A Dynamic Process

Working and being with children of any age means experiencing and contacting the vitality in ourselves as we connect with a child's story and deeper needs. In essence, as a guide I am mostly with my own felt sensing, checking how and when to respond and when not to intervene. Creating a working hypothesis about what the child's process is, helps me to include objective knowledge or useful theories, including the phases of the Focusing process—such as the need to create distance—as well as my own felt sense of the situation. All of this indicates what intervention would be useful for the child.

Part of the essence of *Children Focusing* is that the child can make and hold connections with their implicit knowing, with what can be sensed in the body, and with their felt sense of life experiences. Sometimes this is implicit, just waiting for the right moment of attention and sometimes it needs a bit more exploration. This is what I mean by *listening in three directions*.

The key is that we are meeting the other person where they are and that means accepting many different moods, sensations, images, thoughts, or movements that they express. From joy to sorrow, to discomfort, we are there, with them. If, all of a sudden, we are not there, like we disengage or give advice, the other person feels that and generally; experiences that moment as rejection, possibly linked to self-shame or, at least, to what has NOT worked up until now in helping them be more comfortable in their own skin.

We can discern that the basic skills and attitudes in this kind of listening include an empathic, unconditional attitude to the child and his or her process, paying attention to the bodily felt aspects of experience, respecting the child's—and your own—boundaries and looking out for those subtle moves or movements, like the body relaxing, being more open etc. that indicate when the child's process is begins to carry forward.

Most important of all, the listener really needs to be attuned to their own process, distinguishing what is happening inside themselves and sensing for the next step that will assist the child to carry forward his or her own process. It is very important therefore to keep your own Focusing process and skills alive . It is the foundation for *listening in three directions*.

References

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