

Communicating With Teens in Ways That Change Behavior Part 1: How to Engage a Tuned-Out Teen



GETTING A TUNED-OUT TEEN TO TALK

DO YOU HAVE AN ADOLESCENT who talks up a storm with friends on their cell phone or online but barely nods or grunts when you try to find out what's going on? Do you ask even more questions out of exasperation that get you nowhere?

If you pressure your child to talk when you are feeling anxious, agitated or angry, you are most likely to sound accusatory, hysterical or like an interrogator. As a result, your child is even more likely to shut down, become evasive or lie to escape you. Try these four steps if what you've been doing hasn't been working:

- ▶ **Step 1.** Try limiting questions about what your teen is thinking or feeling, or how school or social life is going for a full week. (Beware, this may be easier said than done.) Unless you have reason to believe there is some immediate threat to your adolescent's safety, resist the urge to inquire about their every thought for a few days. If you have been pushing your child to talk without realizing it, this step will help put things back on the right track.
- ▶ **Step 2.** Let your child know you are there to support her if she wants to talk. Instead of asking questions during this time, notice when his or her mood or behavior shifts and make simple, compassionate observations instead of asking lots of questions. For example, avoid a barrage of questions like, "Is something bothering you? What's going on? What happened at school?" Instead, say, "It looks like something's been troubling you lately. I'm here if you want to talk about it."
- ▶ **Step 3.** Prioritize time together by finding simple activities to share. Make something together. Take a drive. Share something you know your child already enjoys, or that he or she can teach you how to do. Do a chore together.
- ▶ **Step 4.** Tell a few stories about times in your own adolescence when you felt confused, anxious, left out or misunderstood, and how you came out of it eventually. You might be surprised to find that with patience and persistence, your teen will eventually begin to open up to you on his or her own!

HOW TO LISTEN EFFECTIVELY WHEN YOUR TEEN IS READY TO TALK

- ▶ Listen with full attention. Stop what you are doing (unless it's a simple task you're already doing together) and focus on your child. This doesn't necessarily mean making eye contact the whole time he's expressing himself. It may be easier for him to talk about something embarrassing or disturbing if you simply sit close by with eyes down and ears cocked – especially with adolescent boys.
- ▶ Don't interrupt or start giving advice unless he or she requests it.
- ▶ Ask short, open-ended questions, such as: "Can you tell me more?" or "Then what happened?"
- ▶ Encourage him or her to continue by nodding, saying "ooh" or "uummm," or repeating the last bit of what he or she just said and then waiting for more.
- ▶ Don't become agitated or start yelling, even if your heart is pounding as he tells you something that shocks you.
- ▶ Acknowledge your adolescent's feelings and concerns as valid, even if you think he or she is over-reacting to a minor incident. Nothing feels more invalidating than hearing, "Oh, it's not that bad," or "Don't worry, you'll be fine," when your teen is describing something upsetting.

IT'S NOT JUST WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S WHAT YOU DO

🕒 Take inventory of your own behavior. If you want your child to be ethical, polite, careful and safe, are you modeling these values in your own life?

- Do you use rude or foul language with or around your children?
- Do you break promises?
- Do you gossip about others?
- Do you take dangerous risks?
- Do you drink excessively?
- Are you consistent with family rules and consequences?
- Do you prioritize time with your family?
- Do you explode or shut down when you're upset?

As parents and guardians, you must change your own behavior or seek help for yourself before you can expect your child to be open and responsive to you.

Now that you have the basics for engaging in open dialogue with your teens, find out more about how to structure specific conversations about Internet safety and “netiquette”. Download our free tip sheet on Courageous Conversations About Internet Safety and Netiquette at IncredibleInternet.com.

READING SUGGESTIONS

How To Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk (2005), **Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish**

Totally Wired: What Teens & Tweens are Really Doing Online (2007), **Anastasia Goodstein**

www.IncredibleInternet.com

www.Netsmartz.com