

LISTENING AND CONNECTING

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“You never listen!” That is the cry of the adolescent. You probably remember saying something similar to your own parents. The cry of parents of adolescents, on the other hand, is often, “They don't talk to me anymore.”

But, is this normal? Why do our kids stop talking, and why do they not think we're listening? How can we open up those lines of communication, especially as our kids get older and the consequences of their decisions are so much greater?

First of all, as children get older, it is absolutely developmentally appropriate that they begin separating from their parents and begin looking outside the home for role models of behavior and social connections. Their friends outside the home become more and more important to them, and they will begin to question where they fit into society, not just their family. Adolescents want to know who they are in a larger context, and start making decisions, consciously and unconsciously about where they are going and what they will be doing. However, their roots are still in the family, and while they are moving out into the world pre-teenagers and teenagers are still looking back over their shoulder for security, encouragement and direction (believe it or not). How we provide these things effectively is the trick.

Learning how to listen is the key to unlocking the communication gap between adults and older children and teenagers, specifically learning to listen without fixing. Too often adults listen to talk, fix or advise. Even if the information that we want to impart is wise, accurate and potentially helpful, it is more often than not unwanted and subsequently rejected. This leaves adults wondering why their child brought up a topic in the first place!

Effective listening involves listening, reflecting and checking back in for understanding. It also requires holding back from any input, unless it is specifically asked for (and even then, answering with a reflective question may prove more helpful). It is important to remember that when kids come to us to talk, they are frequently looking for understanding, connection, and a place to process their own experience. Here's how to provide that:

- Mirror or reflect their statements or concerns back to them.
- Ask how they felt or feel about the situation, or guess how they might feel and state that.
- Seek to understand their point of view and state why it might make sense that they feel the way they're feeling.
- Ask if there is anything else.
- Ask if there is anything else, until they're done.
- Say nothing. (This is where adults are tempted to jump in with advice, correction, perspective, etc.)

What parents often find by not offering up advice or direction, is that their children are incredibly capable problem solvers, especially if they feel understood, trusted and connected. As children get older, the stakes go up for their decision making, and there is always someone who will provide an understanding ear. Who will that be?