

How Do I Get My Child to Talk/Communicate?

By Scott Taylor, Caribbean Mountain Academy Director

Many parents learn that as their child begins puberty, they can become moody, indifferent, selfish, and distant towards their parents. The most important thing a parent can do to prevent, or at the very least dilute this lack of communication is to develop a dialoging lifestyle with their child before they enter this difficult phase of life.

It may be cliché to state the old adage “*how does a child spell love.....T, I, M, E.*” There is no substitute for spending time with your child. Even seeming mundane events with your child sends them a message that you care and that you’re available. Getting them away from the normal distractions of life is a great option as well. Things like traveling together, fishing, hiking, hunting, conversations around the dinner table, or even board games are great. However, don’t discount other events that are more mainstream such as shopping, athletic events, video games, movies, TV, skateboarding, concerts, etc. Some opportunities present more quiet time conversations (uninterrupted); however, other opportunities offer shared experiences to be expressed and discussed later.

Even if your teen “speaks a different language,” meaning “*teenager language*,” always stop, listen, and try to understand. Look for some commonality, even a small portion of what they’re expressing that is relatable to your personal past experiences. Acknowledge their emotion by relating it to a similar situation you’ve been through. Identifying with your teen’s comments is a strong “connector” for them in seeing you as relatable, someone who is listening, someone who cares, and someone who has felt some semblance of their experience from your past.

Never speak out of emotion. Emotion is your enemy in communication. Always pause before you respond, pray, and consider the right words with the right demeanor and tone. How you respond can alter not only the direction of the conversation, but also a child’s future. The bible gives this advice “¹⁹ *My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,* ²⁰ *because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires (James 1:19-20).*” If you find that you or your child are simply too emotional to rationally communicate, give yourselves some time and space to process. Once the emotion of the moment has receded, try again. If communication again becomes too emotional, consider bringing in a 3rd party whom you both trust to mediate the conversation. In some instances, it may be best to seek professional counseling to communicate. Remember, whatever it takes, you must keep communication channels open. Lack of communication, in any relationship, leads to a broken relationship. Do what you must to communicate with your teen.

As you communicate with your child, ask curious questions. Don’t talk AT your teen; talk WITH them. Let them know it’s okay to struggle in life – that it’s human. Let them know that you have struggles as well. Empower your teen by asking them what they think about a situation. Ask them to think of possible solutions. This helps them process, keeps you both engaged, and allows you a voice of guidance without demanding direction. As teenagers grow, so does their desire for independence. It is quite surprising how well teens are able to process and develop plans for improved behavior if given time and power to do so.

Finally, remember that you are not responsible for your teen's reaction. Speak the truth to them, in love, but speak truth. You do them a great disservice if you are afraid of hurting their feelings by speaking the truth. Many have stated that sometimes *"the truth hurts."* This is a fact. However, the opposite is also true and is much more damaging, *"avoidance of pain only brings more pain."* If you avoid telling your child the truth about their behavior; if you avoid disciplining your child; if you sugar-coat a potentially damaging circumstance or behavior, you will only inflict more pain on your child and your family. The following statement is also true, *"avoidance of communication with your child will yield the pain of a distrust, isolation, and drive them to others whom they feel will listen and understand them."* And often, those whom they seek out for communication, for acceptance, - those with whom they form relationships, are those who will negatively influence them. Make time for you teen.

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Part II

By Grant Anderson, Family and Teen Counselor

When a child begins to stop talking to his parents it can be an emotional struggle on the parents. It often feels like the child doesn't trust or want help from his parents. This can be both frustrating and very worrisome for parents. So why do kids stop talking and communicating to those they used to look up to and rely on in their lives? How come it is so difficult for a child to see that parents have their best intentions in mind, and just want to help? These are good questions that have plagued good parents for many years.

When a child is struggling to talk it often represents something very specific to the child. Teenagers specifically are well known to not communicate directly, yet they may use many non-verbal communication styles. In working with children Attachment Communication Training (ACT) can be quite useful. The concept uses four steps in engaging with your child. First, *share* this can be powerful to children to hear their parents talk about how they are feeling. Make sure to be brief and concise, but honest in your sharing. Be observant to your own body language and tone of voice when sharing. Second, *listen* it's important to be non-judgmental when doing this. Again gauge your nonverbal communication and be sure to have an empathy attitude (putting yourself in their shoes) when talking with your child. Third, *re-state* summarizing what they are telling you. This helps the child feel like they are being heard and strengthens your ability to listen to them more intentionally. Finally, *feedback* makes sure that the child expressing themselves in verbal communication gets a chance to tell their parents how listened to how they felt. This shows the child that you value their opinion and make them a priority in listening to them and not just talking to them.

In working to have communication with a child it's important to praise success. When you observe even the beginnings of the communication you want from child affirm this in them.

Encouraging this behavior is not done through gifts or material possession, but is most effective through verbal and non-verbal approval in words and expression, as 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up...” (NIV). As we build our children up in both praise and affirmation they learn to respond to us better and become more comfortable in their communication with us. Keep your intentions of getting your child to talk at the core of your communication interactions, and not having your child hear your thoughts on their choices.

Talking Tips

Does it ever seem that you and your child are talking different languages or not talking at all? You may find these tips to be helpful in bridging the communication gap.

1. Chat with your child. If communicating has been lacking in your relationship, chatting with your child is a good way to start again. Making small talk, without being critical, creates a non-threatening environment for kids to express themselves.
2. Remember that a child’s behavior is sometimes their language. However, it’s best to ask rather than assume what they are trying to say non-verbally.
3. Eating is a social activity that can create a positive environment and time to your child about their day. Establish this habit early in your family.
4. Set a time for one-on-one time with each child and make it a special time alone with each parent. Since each child-parent relationship is unique, it a great opportunity to grow relationships.
5. Be sure to engage in equal sharing time versus probing into the child’s thoughts and feelings. Reciprocity builds intimacy and trust.

Start small with just one of these tips. Try it for at least 1 month and then experiment by adding another tip. Communication is the life skill used to build relationships. Practice perfects life skills.

Other Resources

- *For Parents Only: Getting Inside the Head of Your Kid* by Shaunti Feldhahn and Lisa A. Rice
- *Reaching Teens in Their Natural Habitat: A Field Guide for Savvy Parents* by Danny Holland
- *The Five Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* by Gary Chapman
- *Confident Parenting* by Jim Burns
- *Parenting Today’s Adolescents* by Dennis Rainey

- *What's Happening to My Teen* by Mark Gregston