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H.E.A.R.ing out our Teenagers

When was the last time you had a good conversation with your teenager?
Did the conversation go well or end up in an argument?
Do you find it frustrating trying to connect with your teenager?
Do you sometimes feel the more you try, the less they say?

Conversations with our teenagers can be a big challenge but it is a crucial and important activity. It is crucial for parents because we do want to understand how our teenagers think and feel and we want to connect with them to ensure they make good decisions. It is crucial for teenagers too, because their ability to make sense of their world and express themselves confidently and appropriately is a life skill that will help them grow in confidence.

Yet when communication between parents and teenagers are filled with tension and emotional clashes, it often leaves both sides wanting to give up. Before you abort the attempts to connect with your teenager, let us consider how we can H.E.A.R. them out.

Hear them out.

"My parents work too hard. There is never enough time to talk to them. I mean, about everyday stuff."

"Don't say, 'you can tell me anything', and then freak out and lecture us when we do."

"They are just not listening. I don't even want to talk because if I try I will be accused of arguing or being rude."

It is really hard to be a good listener. But try it. Your teenager needs you to listen and they really do have things to say. Try to make time to listen to them and when they do talk, make no attempt to interrupt your teenager until he finishes. Just listen attentively using good eye contact and attending behavior like nodding or an occasional pat on the shoulder. Let your teenager off load what is on his mind before you try to off load what is on yours.

Empathise. Put yourself in their shoes.

"We worry about what others think about us, we worry about academic competition, the tons of homework we have every day, we sometimes wish we can just release it out."

"Teenagers have a lot of stress. Maybe more stress than parents. They can say whatever they want to say to us but no way can we say what we want to them."

"When I tell them something that makes me mad, they say, 'take a rest', 'forget it', and that turns me off".

Your teenagers have feelings and they need you to acknowledge that you understand what they are telling you. Even if you disagree, don't be too quick to give your opinions, or suggest solutions – you kill the conversation. Use phrases like "Sounds like you really had a bad day and you are disappointed", "I can see this means a lot to you, how do you feel?", "You feel very frustrated over this, tell me more". It is important to your teenager to know that you are willing to know how they feel and what they are thinking. It helps them feel understood and that you care.

Ask and clarify.

"I hate it when my parents assume – they hear something and then they assume the rest. Very soon they start scolding or lecturing me."

"They blame things on me that aren't true. Sometimes I don't even bother to explain."

Explore more deeply what is being said instead of jumping to conclusions, brushing it off or judging them. Sometimes familiarity breeds contempt and so we think we know what our teenager is saying or what he wants to put across to us. Yet it is better to be sure because a teenager can feel really slighted if what we say about them is not true. See if you can identify with them by repeating or rephrasing "So what you are saying is", and ask questions that will bring out greater detail and clarity: "How does that affect you?", "Why do you think that is so?"



"Is there something else that is bothering you"? You may be surprised to hear that what your teenager actually thinks and feels about the issue is quite different from what you assumed.

Reflection.

"They think they know us. They say, 'We had the same problems when we were young', but they don't realise that we are not them and we have our own set of problems. Sometimes I don't even think they really bother."

"My parents discuss things with me and we try to come up with solutions."

"My mother talks to me about things to say, if people want me to do things I don't want to do."

"My dad once told me about the trouble he got into when he was a kid - that made me feel better about the trouble I was in."

A crucial point in our conversations with our teenagers is to be able to achieve deeper understanding and connection. It is one thing to tell our teenagers our opinions and solutions. It is another thing to have them come to the same resolution. Not every conversation ends in agreement but if our teenager is able to express himself clearly and feel heard, it sets the stage for him to see things from another's point of view. Not every teenager is keen to be told what to do but when he feels he has been a part of the process of decision making, it is easier for him to accept the outcome. When you wish to direct towards alternatives and solutions, use reflective questions like "What do you think about this?", "Is there something else we can do?", "What could make this better?", "Have you considered that?" Involving our teenagers in the process will help them develop skills in problem solving and in communication.

Consider the two conversations illustrated below. In this situation, the father wants his son to stop playing on the computer:

Conversation One:

Father: Son, please prepare yourself to stop playing as it is over the time limit already.

Son: Yes I know. Soon.

(Father sits at the sofa a short distance away. Son finishes the game but fails to clear the level so he hits the table and the keyboard falls to the ground with a loud bang)

Father: What is this? I asked you to stop the game and you are showing me your temper? (assumption)

Son: No, I was already stopping! (protesting as a matter of fact)

Father: How dare you behave so rudely! You are challenging me by banging the table! (forming opinion and correction)

Son: What did I do? You asked me to stop and I stopped and now you want to scold me? (protesting in defense)

Father: You are being violent like a gaming addict! I should ban you from computers. (name calling and threats)

Son: That is not fair! You asked me to stop and now you are being unreasonable! (challenging and reacting)

In this conversation, the direction moves towards greater hostility and misunderstanding. It brings out the worst in both father and son.

Conversation Two:

Father: Son, please prepare yourself to stop playing as it is over the time limit already.

Son: Yes I know, soon.

(Father sits at the sofa a short distance away. Son finishes the game but fails to clear so he hits the table and the keyboard falls with a loud bang)

Father: Son, what is happening? (checking it out)

Son: Nothing, the keyboard dropped. (stating the facts)

Father: I saw you banging the table. Please let me know what is going on? (hearing him out)

Son: I couldn't clear the level. I was so close. It was my fifth attempt already. (explaining)

Father: I see. You were frustrated because you almost cleared the level but couldn't. (empathising) Help me understand if it was also because I asked you to stop playing and you were showing your unhappiness? (clarifying)

Son: No. I was ready to stop. It's just that I was so close so I slammed the table and the keyboard fell. (answering the question)

Father: I see. For a moment I almost thought that you were being rude but I can see it was an accident. Would you think you could be more careful with the computer equipment even if you get excited again? (reflecting)

Son: Ok. I'm sorry I was carried away. (responding)

This conversation moves in a completely different direction. It brings about more clarity of the issues from both sides and prevents any misunderstanding from escalating into a deep conflict or attack of each other.

'H.E.A.R.ing' out our teenagers helps us engage in deeper communication as a whole and it will certainly lead to a more satisfying relationship with our teenagers.

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