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Parenting Made Easy System

**NAVIGATING THE CHOPPY WATERS OF
THE TEENAGE YEARS**

DAY 7: LEARNING TO LISTEN

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In a nutshell – Today, we are going to look at tools and techniques that will help you become a brilliant listener, and turn you into a parent that your teenager will enjoy confiding in! ...

Welcome back!

The need to feel understood

I believe the deepest desire of any human being is to feel understood - whether they are a toddler, teen or a tearaway!

Everyone wants to feel understood, respected, heard and valued for who they are. Teenagers, of course, are no exception. That's why I believe that developing your understanding skills is really important and help to build self-esteem, confidence and the lifetime bonds of love between you and your child.

As parents, we all have a tendency to feel we "know better" than our kids as we've "been there - done it - and got the tee-shirt".

After all, we are older and wiser than they are, so we often don't really listen to what our kids are telling us. Instead we presume, judge, make assumptions and often rush in to rescue them with our advice or suggestions like Superman or Tarzan swinging in the jungle!

We mean well - as we naturally have our kid's best interest at heart, but it doesn't really make for great relationships and lines of successful communication particularly with an emerging independent hormonal teenager.

I actually think nature was trying to tell us something as we have two ears and one mouth for a reason - and I think that's a brilliant way to help us remember to listen first and talk later!

There's a really lovely Native American Indian saying which says

“Listen, or your tongue will make you deaf.”

Being a good, attentive and sophisticated listener is absolutely crucial to being a really successful, relaxed and great parent of a teenager. So I am going to help you look at different types of communication, and at different ways to improve how you currently listen and talk to your children.

Listening attentively

We're all guilty of it... We appear to be listening, but we are not really hearing what our teenager, our mother in law or our partner is actually saying to us.

There are loads of reasons why this happens - you may be juggling three things at once - like cooking the dinner, helping with a younger child's homework and unloading the dishwasher. Or you are just pre-occupied with your own worries or agenda. However, learning to listen actively and attentively is a really important skill to develop as a parent, and it can really transform your relationships with your children.

I think it's useful to know about 3 different modes of listening:

Competitive listening

Competitive or combative listening is where the person talking (usually the parent) is far more interested in promoting their point of view instead of listening, thinking and really considering the other person's point of view.

You know how it feels when you're just waiting for a break in the flow of the other person's conversation so you can get your penny's worth across. I see this a lot when I'm working with the parents of teenagers!!

It often happens when parents are not really absorbing their teenager's message, and are really just waiting to jump in and attack their child's point of view - and are always planning what they want to say next. They are actually just "pretending" to listen to their child.

Competitive listening often results in arguments, frustrations and tears with lots of misunderstandings and anger all round.

Passive or attentive listening

Passive or attentive listening is where parents are genuinely interested in what's being discussed, but they don't really engage or connect with the conversation and stay rather aloof and outside the real energy of the conversation. This can be interpreted by your children as being uninterested, which can also lead to misunderstandings amongst families.

Active and reflective listening

The third type of listening is the one that I want to help you develop as it is the most successful form of communication for getting along well with your teenager.

This type of listening happens when you are genuinely interested in your child's point of view or message. You sincerely want to know what your teenager is thinking, feeling and what they want.

Parents who listen actively join in and show they are interested by making little comments, nodding their head and really listening carefully to show empathy before reacting. This sort of listener is really effective as they also take the time to make sure they've understood what's been said to them. Children with parents who are active and reflective listeners feel

heard and understood. And when they feel understood, “bad” behaviour and anger often melt away.

The 5 gremlins

Here are five common ways that parents often fail to listen properly:

1. **Being pre-occupied** with your own worries, commitments or concerns. You are miles away, worrying about deadlines, the dry cleaning or school pick-ups.
2. **Pretending to listen**, where you say “uh huh” or “oh dear - that’s terrible” or “that sounds great” when you’ve not really taken on board what your child has been saying. Your kids will pick up on this habit and over time they will stop talking to you.
3. **Selective listening**, where you only pay attention to the parts of the conversation that interest you and respond only to those bits. This tends to hijack another other person’s conversation, and moves it onto your agenda making the other person feel frustrated and annoyed.
4. **Words only listening**, where you hear only the actual words being said, and don’t pick up on the hidden agenda underneath the meaning. It’s like when someone asks how you are, and you reply “Yeah...fine”. What you really mean is “No! I’m hacked off that you left your shoes out in front of the bed again and I tripped over them.”
5. **Self-centred listening**, when you only see things from your point of view. You aren’t really seeing the situation or the story from your teenager’s “really expensive pair of Nike trainers” point of view. This sort of listening can turn into one-upmanship where there has to be a winner and a loser - as if the communication is some sort of competition. For example: “You think you’ve had it tough. Well let me tell you how tough it was growing up when I was a kid!!”

When you listen to your teenager from the “me” perspective you can easily find yourself judging, advising or probing them too much.

You make assumptions and judgments based on your own experiences and expectations of the world, and fail to account for your children’s experiences.

Your children don’t want to be judged - they want to be heard. And they certainly don’t want to hear the “when I was your age” scenario, which is rarely relevant to your child’s situation or experience.

The other thing parents often do that puts teenagers off is to probe too deeply before they are ready to open up. You know the sort of thing:

- “So how was the party then - who was there - was anyone supervising you?”
- “What did you get up to at Pete’s then - I suppose you played the PlayStation all afternoon - hope you weren’t on it all evening?”
- “Was Lily’s Mum around when you watched that film?”
- “How did Sara get home - did she drink too much?”

Kids don’t like to be interrogated with lots of questions when they’re not ready to talk.

I often found my son would open up to talk just as I was about to climb into my long-awaited bubble bath or my soft, warm bed after a tough day at school teaching! But I was flexible enough to take the long-term view and to see the bigger picture, which meant that I needed to listen and chat and to build our relationship.

Now it’s your turn!

How attentively do you listen? Get your pen and paper and answer the following questions honestly:

1. How attentively do you think you listen when your teenager is talking to you?
2. What was the last conversation you had about?
3. If you asked your child how well they thought you listen to them, what would they say?
4. What could you do differently to improve your listening skills?

A Quick Recap

- One of the deepest desires of any human being is to feel understood.
- We are all guilty of failing to listen to someone attentively from time to time.
- Attentive listening will improve your relationship with your teenager beyond measure.
- Avoid competitive and passive listening whenever you recognise that you are doing it.
- Being pre-occupied is natural, but bring your attention back whenever you realise that you are not focusing on what someone is saying.
- Your family's communication will become positive and harmonious if you each learn to *listen*.

Next time ...

We are going to consider how the way you ask your teenager a question can affect your relationship with them. I will teach you how to ask questions in a positive and productive way ...

See you then!



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