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Parenting Made Easy System

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

DAY 8: ASKING QUESTIONS

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In a nutshell – Today, 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 ...

Welcome back!

What sort of questions do you ask?

Questions are the currency of good communication and they can be very powerful. They unlock confusion and help understanding but as parents we often don't stand back and think about how we speak, or about the impact that the questions we ask will have on our children.

For me it's quite simple: The key to really effective communication is:

1. Ask the right questions
2. Sit back and **really listen** to the answers

As parents, you can have a huge impact on the relationships you develop by the way you ask your children questions. Research has shown that kids who are able to communicate effectively through being talked to openly are less frustrated at home - or at school - and they are kinder to other people. They learn to discuss, rather than just shout, and they learn how to argue rationally and articulately as they get older. They can even speak in public without being paralysed with anxiety, and it all comes from the types of questions you get used to asking them.

Open and closed questions

An open-ended question is one that needs a descriptive answer and is quite elaborate, whereas a closed question can be answered really quickly with a short “Yes” or “No” reply.

Getting your teenager to open up tends to require asking more open questions than closed ones. For example, instead of asking “Was school ok?”, ask instead “What happened at school today?”.

Now it's your turn!

Rephrase the following questions to make them open ones rather than closed:

1. Is chicken ok for dinner tonight?
2. Are you going out on Saturday?
3. Are you meeting Jess tonight?
4. Have you done your homework?
5. What grade did you get in your maths test?
6. Do you need a lift in the morning?

Open ended questions

Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

How.....?

What.....?

Where.....?

When.....?

Who.....?

How much....?

Where.....?

It's often a good idea to avoid the "Why....?" Question, as it tends to make teenagers feel defensive as if you are criticising them. For example:

"So why did you leave all those books all over the table?"

"Why didn't you text me at 10 o'clock like you said you would?"

Changing the way you ask questions might feel a bit strange at first, as you are developing a new habit, but like everything in life the more you do it, the more it will feel natural. Try sticking up post-it notes, somewhere where you will see them, with examples of open-ended questions you want to ask.

Ask questions appropriately, and you will notice a dramatic improvement in the quality of your conversations, and in the length and enjoyment of your exchanges with your teenager too.

There's a huge difference between "talking at" your teenager and "talking with" them. It's a bit like the difference between "laughing at" or "laughing with" someone. As parents, you need to guard against the conversation that feels like a lecture, inquisition or a nag - and using open-ended questions is a really effective way of achieving that.

Your tone of voice

I remember when my Mum used to call me. If she called me "Susan" it usually meant that I was in trouble! But if she called me "Sue" it was almost always ok and just probably time for tea!! It wasn't the words she used - it was all in her tone.

This week, listen to yourself and make a mental note of when you use a sarcastic tone, an angry tone, an encouraging tone or a gentle, sympathetic tone. See if you can identify what causes you to use that particular tone. Are you reacting to something your children have said or done? Which tone of voice creates harmony - and which ones don't?

If you can identify the triggers that cause you to adopt certain tones then you are more likely to be able to press your "pause button", step back and change the tone that you use.

Children are extremely sensitive to the tone of your voice, so pay attention over the next week to how you say things to them. If you don't like how you say it – change your tone!!

It's also worth remembering not to match the tone of your child. Teenagers are masters at getting under our skin. They know what words to use, and exactly how to phrase them, so as to make you hot under the collar. As infants it's their plaintive cry, as toddlers it's the tantrum, and as teenagers it's the whinge or the whine!

No matter how hard we try to remain calm when our child acts up, some of us let our temper get the better of us and can't help but match the tone of our child. For example, if your teenager whines at you it's often tempting to answer them in an equally whiny voice. This will rarely have a positive outcome! Instead, try answering a whine with a pleasant, no-nonsense:

"Hey -Let's not speak in that tone of voice to each other. You're older now. Let's chat this through properly."

The key to changing any type of unacceptable tone is just not to match it. No match. No game. It's as simple as that! The challenge is that many of us don't realise when we are matching our children's tone. It may well be that the tone we use with our teenager is exactly the thing that makes them get on the defensive and into trouble in the first place!

PAUSE the TOOLKIT here and ask yourself some questions and jot down the answers as I always feel writing things down really clarifies your thoughts properly.

Now it's your turn!

Think of a recent situation when you and your teenager argued about something. Now get your pen and paper and write down:

1. What was the argument about?
2. What tone of voice did you adopt throughout the argument?
3. Could you have used a different tone that might have resulted in a different outcome?
4. If you have this argument again, what tone of voice will you adopt?

Now think about how well you think you communicate with your teenager. Here's a checklist to tick and fill in. Ask yourself:

- | | |
|--|----------|
| Do you say what you mean and mean what you say? | Yes / No |
| Do you talk positively to your kids? | Yes / No |
| Communicate calmly in difficult or challenging situations? | Yes / No |
| Are you aware of how you listen? | Yes / No |
| Do you talk “at” not “with” them? | Yes / No |
| Do you ask open ended-questions? | Yes / No |
| Do you create quality talk time with your teenager? | Yes / No |

How do you rate your communication skills at the moment on a scale of 1-10? (10 being brilliant and 1 being lousy)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Which of the communication skills we have reviewed would you say you are really good at?

Which one is you're least effective?

What do you think is the reason for that?

If you could develop and improve in just one area which one would you choose?

Make a commitment to yourself today to practise just one area of communication. Enjoy noticing the improvements in your family relationships, and record them so that you can see the progress you are making.

Remember to be patient - Rome wasn't built in a day and family relationships and new skills take time to mature - like fine wine!

A Quick Recap

- Improve your communication with your teenager by asking more open questions than closed ones.
- Try not to ask too many “why?” questions because they are often perceived as criticism.
- Talk “with” your teenager, not “at” them.
- Be mindful of your tone of voice when you talk with your children.

Next time ...

We are going to talk about different ways of showing affection to our children, and how not to embarrass them in public ...

See you then!



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