

Listening Crucial to Communicating With Teen

by Laura Backen Jones

Parents often shake their heads and express sadness, telling me that their teen has become critical and disrespectful, that they don't even know their child anymore. Yet how often do we consider how our teens view us?

Recently, I led a focus group of teenaged boys who expressed grief and dismay about their parents' behavior. One clear message came through: they wanted and needed to lean on their parents, but many didn't think it was possible because of the way their parents behaved toward them. They felt:

- **Alone.** They longed for their parents to be calm and approachable, to listen and treat them respectfully, rather than yelling, nagging and inviting resistance.
- **Hurt** that they were not valued. The message they hear is: "You are OK as long as you perform up to my expectations."
- **Embarrassed and overwhelmed** by their parent's strong emotional reactions, especially parents' anger and sadness.
- **Afraid to take chances.** Teens said that their parents are quick to rush in and "rescue" them, sending the message that they are incapable of figuring out a problem for themselves.
- **Unimportant.** Teens repeatedly said that they were told what to do, rather than invited to contribute to solving a problem.

The best way to have influence on your teen is to listen. Truly listen. When is the last time you listened to your teen's point of view, without rushing in to express your own, or to drive home a lesson? Teens won't open up unless they feel it is safe to do so. Here are some tips:

- **Notice the powerful contribution of your own behavior and emotions.** When you feel angry, take time to calm down before talking with your teen.
- **Move toward your teen's interests**, rather than away, even if the topic is foreign or distasteful to you. Explore what your teen values. Ask "what" and "how" questions to learn more.
- **Share your opinion without lecturing.** Be respectful, direct and honest, and consider your teen's point of view.
- **Take responsibility for your own mistakes.** Acknowledge that you make them and resolve out loud to behave differently when you do.
- **Give your teen space to solve his or her problems** and offer support and empathy if your teen stumbles, rather than saying, "I told you so."

When my high-school-aged daughter became interested in a rap artist, I was shocked and concerned. But I took some time out and asked myself: what do I want her to learn about him so that she can make an informed decision about what to do? I asked her questions. What did she value about him? What sort of effect did she think his music have on people? We read interviews and articles about him together.

I finally got the courage to sit down with her and read his song lyrics. We weren't even through the first song when my daughter turned to me and said, "These lyrics are disgusting and negative. I can't believe I ever liked him." She made her own decision to reject his music and never looked back.

What did I learn from that experience? Even though my initial reaction was to ignore what she was telling me and demand she change her behavior, I realized that managing my own behavior in the service of our relationship was key: noticing my feelings; getting them under control; trusting her judgment and staying open to her point of view, made it safe for her to open up to me. We grew closer, and, in the process, I actually had some influence.

Laura Backen Jones, Ph.D. is a developmental psychologist and researcher at Oregon Research Institute. She teaches Principles of Child Guidance, a free class for parents of children of all ages. The class is sponsored by Lane Community College. To enroll or learn more, call 541-463-5234 or visit www.lanec.edu/ccfc.