Is my teen listening? Tips on talking to your teen

My twins just got their driving learner’s permits (yikes!), and Dr. Lai’s son is a few months away from getting his. We know that we will have many talks with our sons about driving.

But is my teen listening? Books and community lectures on the topic of “how to talk to teens” abound, and in the office we hear exasperated parents searching for ways to talk effectively to their teens and bemoan “She never listens to me, maybe she will listen to you.” In this post, we give you tips on talking to your teen.

Here’s the secret: **while teens wear their “bored face” or may act as if they do not hear their parents, in fact they are listening**. Below are suggestions on talking to your teen in ways your teen will find palatable.

1-Express your opinion as **your opinion,** such as “I believe…” or “Your dad and I feel…,” which implies to your teen that you understand that he or she may have a different opinion.

2-Remember that while teens do have opinions, they lack life experience. **Use anecdotes**: “I remember when I was in high school, a friend of mine found himself in this situation…” Anecdotes are less confrontational than directly warning your child about a situation that you are concerned he may be in.

3–Join your teen when she watches TV. Comment on the characters or plot theme, and ask what your teen would do, or if she thinks that the show reflects reality. Criticize the character if you disagree with the way the character is reacting to a situation and allow your teen to hear your thought process. She will file your thoughts away for future consideration even if she disagrees with you at the time. Encourage dialogue from your teen.

4–Say good-night to your teen in his room. Stay and visit a bit. Just like when they were young, teens often choose bedtime to bring up an event or dilemma from earlier in the day. (Hopefully they are getting to bed before you do.)

5-If your teen actually does choose to ask your advice, **avoid jumping in immediately with a solution**. Remember to pause and ask first how he thinks he could solve the problem or what he

has already tried. Then you can encourage your teen's ideas if you think they have merit and praise his insights, or you can offer your suggestions as further options.

6–Attend your teen's sporting events or concerts. Your child is the same one who at age four looked for you in the stands during the T-ball game. The event will give you both something to talk about later. Just refrain from yelling out anything embarrassing. Or anything at all!

7-Preface your rules with "**So you are safe**." Teens stomach house rules better when they hear you are concerned about their safety rather than about being the boss. For example, "So I know you are safe, please call or text me if you are running late," rather than "You will be punished if you break curfew."

8–Put down your phone when talking to your teen, and insist that he does the same. When you are using your phone, your teen feels ignored (think back to trying to talk on the phone when your teen was a toddler) and thus you encourage him to ignore you back.

9- Car trips are excellent times for talking to your teen, so volunteer to drive him rather than always relying on the other teen's parent. Maybe it's the lack of eye contact, but when you drive your teen somewhere, you are not otherwise distracted- your teen might be encouraged to talk to you in the car. Do not, however, invite possible heated conversation while YOUR TEEN is behind the wheel- especially when he is still learning to drive!

In addition to strengthening bonds with our kids, routine talking with our teens encourages them to talk to us when they need help, to consider our advice, and to learn from our own life experiences. In turn we impart communication skills and independence as teens learn to problem-solve and avoid life-altering mistakes. Talking with our teens encourages positive

attention. Again, remember your teen as the toddler who might have thrown a toy or hit his brother to get your attention.

Dr. Lai’s friends joke that they renamed their children “Door 1” and “Door 2” when they became teenagers because the parents spent a lot of time talking to closed doors. But her friends kept talking, because they knew, even behind closed doors, teens do listen.

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