

How to Get More Than A Grunt

First, talking is hard work for our kids. They're not all that comfortable doing it and often won't risk it if they don't have to. Second, teens feel parents sometimes mistake them for someone who shares their interests and concerns about life. Third, kids feel less pressure with adults who aren't their parents. (Doesn't that one drive you crazy?) And finally, teens *are* willing to talk when they are ready - not when parents decide they should.

Although communicating with our teens has some built-in obstacles, there are some key things we can do to facilitate the process. One of them is to develop the ability to ask good questions. Good questions are those that enable our children to converse more easily. Communication research shows that 55 percent of any message is physiological (how you sit, look, gesture), 38 percent is tonal (how you sound) and only 7 percent is actually the words you use. That means that approximately 93 percent of what you convey has nothing to do with what you say. Therefore, a few well-chosen words in the form of a great question could open a gateway to their hearts.

Here are some suggestions on how to make your questions "good" questions:

First, avoid questions that only require one-word answers. For example, we often ask, "How was your day?" Answer, "fine." We might open up further conversation if we were to ask "Tell me the best thing that happened at school today." We need to learn to formulate some basic questions that invite our kids to respond more fully ... providing they feel like it.

Second, avoid whenever possible, questions that tend to put our kids on the defensive. This usually includes the dreaded and often used "why" question. "Why" questions usually imply faultfinding and lack of trust. I have found that a statement beginning with the words "help me to understand" gets to the heart of the matter while not sounding as threatening. For example, "Can you help me to understand how it is that you were going to be in at 11:00 p.m. and it's now after midnight?" A question like this tells my child that I am seeking first to understand. Often times we will glean new information before letting our children know how we feel about the situation. This type of statement is very helpful during times of conflict.

Third, in order to prime the conversation pump, make it a habit to ask questions about things of interest to them. This can include their favorite sports, high school activities, and music and media. We need to learn to engage our kids on issues other than those we have on our agenda. It speaks volumes about our interest in them and what they are dealing with.

Fourth, since most of the results are going to depend on what we *don't* say, let us be very aware of *how* we are asking our questions. Our body posture and tone of voice always reveal to our young people what we are "really" asking. Making good eye contact and speaking gently can reap great answer rewards. How far we stand away from our child also tells them something about the importance of the question we are asking.

Fifth, after asking a great question, give them time to answer. Often parents get less than satisfactory answers because we are too ready to cut them off and jump in with another question or an already prepared response. Our kids will soon learn whether we are ready to listen or whether we carry a hidden agenda. Teach your kids that their answers are always fully welcome.

Sixth, learn how to reflect their feelings. One of the skills all great listeners have is the ability to put themselves in the other person's shoes. We need to empathize with them by trying harder to understand their thoughts and feelings. As parents, we can do this by trying to mirror their feelings by repeating them. Let's imagine your child comes home from school and is really upset with her math teacher. You might say, "It sounds like you are really angry with your teacher." Restating what your child has said often opens the door for them to talk further. It also lets them know you are trying to comprehend what they are feeling.

Finally, clarify nebulous words, thoughts and feelings by asking additional questions. For example, "What did you mean when you said I have been 'unfair to you'?" or "What do you mean when you said your friend has been acting 'crazy'?"

Again, these simple questions can lead you into a deeper understanding and sense of what your child is experiencing.

Someone once said the only thing you have to do to entertain some people is to listen to them. Most kids are yearning for parents who will pay attention to them. I really believe our kids want to talk; it's just a matter of how we go about it. Smart parents start when their kids are young and keep working at it during adolescence - that time when young people are distancing themselves from their parents but still longing to have connections. When talking with your kids, don't assume you know and understand their feelings and issues. Their world is very different from the one we grew up in. They are happy to share it with us if we approach it with the right questions and an even better attitude

Source: Article by Paul Robertson. 2001, The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding