

## **Skills for Good Parenting: High School and Beyond - Active Listening**

It's easy to miss out on the important things when you are getting your family's dinner on the table, helping with homework or making sure your child has what they need for their extra-curricular activity. Teens are much more independent and may be turning to their friends for support, and thus much less likely to open up to their parents. The times that they do, and the opportunities these conversations present, are invaluable. As a parent, you should be attuned to when your teen opens up to you, as the advice and support you can offer often has real world consequences. Hold yourself ready and be prepared. If you just go through the motions of listening, your teen will know; more importantly, you will be missing a window into their world. Sometimes the best conversations happen when something other than the conversation is the primary focus. For example, many parents find that their children are much more talkative when in the car.

Think about a conversation where you felt the person you were speaking with really listened to what you were saying. It's likely the person was using some of these active listening techniques and that is what made you feel heard and understood:

- Making eye contact
- Being attentive
- Having an open mind
- Listening to what the person is saying and picture it
- Not interrupting
- Asking questions to help better understand the situation
- Empathizing with the speaker.

However, some of these suggestions for active listening may not work for older children. Teens are often more comfortable opening up when there is no eye contact. And when you are empathizing with them, you don't want to overdo it; you should show that you appreciate how they are feeling, but not necessarily feeling the same thing. Pay attention to how your child responds, both positively and negatively. If you have a conversation where you strike out getting your teen to engage, step back and think about what didn't work. Next time, try a different approach.

With teens, you want to let them say their piece. While you want to show that you are listening by using body language and minimal encouragers like "mm hmm" and "go on," you don't want to give them impression that you know what they are going to say. Especially when talking about something difficult, you should try to summarize what you have heard them say to you, to demonstrate that you have actually heard them. You are helping your teen "trouble-shoot" and work out their problems for themselves, but by staying connected, you can offer guidance or feedback. The trick here, as a parent, is to balance not judging what your child is telling you with helping them to not to make bad choices.

Over time, using these techniques will help develop your family's listening "muscle."

**Validation** shows that you understand what is going on for a person, and as teens approach adulthood it remains important. It doesn't mean that you agree with the behavior, but it shows that you understand where they're coming from. If your teen is disappointed when you don't let them go to a party unless a supervising adult will be present, a validating statement would be "I understand that you are angry that I am calling your friend's parent, but our rule is that you can't go to parties when there isn't going to be adult supervision." You are validating their frustration, and at the same time showing that your actions are based on the rules and boundaries you, as a parent, have set for the family. For teens, it remains important not only to validate your teen's feelings, but to help them understand the complexities of the situation. You are applying a rule that your teen already knows, and not acting arbitrarily to prevent them from being with their friends. At this age, your teen is becoming responsible for the consequences of their own actions and conversations with them should acknowledge it

You can use **I statements** to model appropriate language. For example, "I feel angry when I do your laundry for you and then you throw the clean clothes on the floor."

Remember to use **open ended questions** that require more than a yes or no response to engage your teen. You want to balance asking questions with respecting their privacy. Too many questions may feel like you are prying into their lives. You can show that you respect their opinions and ideas by asking them what they think about something they care about.

Expressing **empathy** is also important. If your child teen seems subdued, you can ask "You seem kind of blue, anything I can do to help?" Follow your teen's lead. If your teen doesn't seem to want to talk at that moment, limit your comments to expressing care and concern and an offer to talk about it when and if they want to talk. If you talked about something in the car the previous week, you can circle back, which reinforces that you were really paying attention.

Be the best listener you can be to help promote good communication and understanding with your family. Active listening is not only about paying attention, it is about engaging in dialogue and one important pay-off is deeper and richer family relationships.

SDJ 8/13/18