

The Art of Active Listening: Improving Communication with your Teenager

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The one skill that a parent of a teen needs above all of the others is the ability to listen. This does not mean that you will agree or accept everything they have to say. This simply means that you will listen twice as much as you will speak. When parents listen actively, they send children the message that they are important enough to have the parent's undivided attention. Many problems can be solved and even prevented when parents take the time to use active listening.

Active listening is about focusing and concentrating on the person who is speaking. The method of active listening discourages parents from jumping in with their opinions, solutions, criticisms, and/or orders. Instead, the art of active listening is to stop what you are doing, look at your child, give them your full attention, look and listen for nonverbal messages, listen to what is said rather than trying to figure out how to reply or fix the problem, and then comment (reflectively) on what you think you heard them say. If you need to ask questions, try to avoid dead-end questions, as they tend to lead to a limited range of responses. Questions that are open-ended lead children to describe, explain, or share ideas and will likely extend the conversation. The following example will model how to use active listening: Teen:

I hate math class.

Parent: Mmnn?

Teen: My friends are picking on me in class

Parent: They are picking on you?

Teen: Yes, They keep saying that I am stupid.

Parent: Do you know why they are saying that you are stupid?

Teen: Yes, because I can't understand the math problems.

Parent: Sounds like you are having problems in math?

Teen: Yes.....(tells mother what she/he is having problems with in math) This parent listened and allowed the teenager to express her feelings about math class and the fact that her peers are making fun of her. This parent did not tell her how to solve the problem nor did the parent deny the teen's feelings. Instead, the parent encouraged the teen to identify the problem and the feelings associated with the problem. The results from using active listening will take time and practice and does not produce changes overnight. Usually, each time you and your teen talk, your conversation will get easier if you utilize the art of active listening.