

How to Encourage Your Child to Talk to You

Most kids talk non-stop when they are in their preschool years, but by the time they reach elementary, middle, and high school you may find that they are far less eager to share what's on their mind with you. As a parent, it can be frustrating to try to get your once talkative child to open up to you, especially when you can sense that something is wrong. It is natural and healthy for a child, especially those in their teenage years, to want some independence from his or her parents, however he or she is still depending on you for support and needs to know that you care about what's going on in his or her life. While pressuring or demanding your child to talk to you will only cause him or her to clam up more, asking the right questions and setting a



respectful, nonjudgmental tone to the conversation can work wonders in encouraging your child to open up to you. The following are some suggestions for how you can go about encouraging your child to talk more openly (and frequently) with you:

- ◆ **Pick up on little conversation openers.** Although it can be excruciating to tear yourself away from what you're doing to focus on a your child's question, how you respond to him or her is crucial in building closeness. To your child, it's an indication of whether he or she can count on you to talk when he or she needs you. And much more important than any conversation you try to initiate, like when you try to get your child to tell you what happened at school that day.
- ◆ **Be available to your teen.** Parents who have close relationships with their children often attribute their closeness to their willingness to be available if their child signals a desire to talk -- even if it's 1am and her boyfriend just broke up with her. This can be difficult if you're also handling a demanding job and other responsibilities, of course. But kids who feel that other things are more important to their parents often look elsewhere when they're emotionally needy.
- ◆ **Ask nonjudgmental questions that require real answers.** Questions that begin with "Why" often make kids defensive; "Why did you wear that?" won't work nearly as well as "What do you think most of the kids will be wearing on the field trip?" Furthermore, asking questions that require more than just one word answers (such as "What was the best thing about school today?") get you much further than questions that can be answered with a brief response (such as "How was school?").
- ◆ **Refrain from jumping in with solutions and advice.** Your child needs a chance to vent, and he can't hear advice until he does. Then he needs a chance to figure out his own solutions, which is how he develops confidence and competence. If you jump in with solutions, this can send the message that you think your child is incompetent. As a parent, it can be very challenging not to rush in to help your child when he or she is having difficulty with something, but when parents reflect feelings and help to brainstorm solutions, kids will find them much more useful to talk to -- and will be much more likely to turn to their parents when they have problems.

- ◆ **Make sure you connect with each of your children every single day.** Even if just for a short time, devoting some individual attention to your child communicates to them that they are important to you. Being on hand when they come home is a sure-fire way to hear the highlights of the day, but anytime you get in their space and in sync with their energy level works. Develop a little ritual, like sharing a cup of tea, shooting baskets outside, or just sitting down somewhere quiet to talk so that you and your child get into the habit of setting aside some time each day to catch up.
- ◆ **Build “special time” with each child into your routine.** Maybe Dad and daughter go to brunch once a month, or play a sport together once a week. Maybe Mom and son get to catch up on his life during the drives to swim team. Again, any time you spend time with your child individually you send them the message that they are a priority to you. Furthermore, kids sometimes wait for those routine times during which they know they will have their parent’s full attention to bring up something that’s bothering them.
- ◆ **If you don't get the response you want to your overtures towards your child step back and watch how you initiate.** Kids have a lot on their minds, from the history test to the soccer tryouts to the newest computer game. Parents can be dismally low on their list, but that's actually a good sign— They can take you for granted because they know you’re there for them. Find ways to get in their face in a friendly, inoffensive way. You have a right to a relationship with your child, but you’re more likely to find the response you want if you can help your child remember why they like you. “I was hoping we could go out for lunch one day this weekend for some time for just the two of us” will work a lot better than “You never tell me anything these days!”
- ◆ **If you make an overture and are greeted with something hurtful -- disdain, sarcasm, or blankness -- try not to respond with anger.** Instead, show your vulnerability and hurt (“Ouch! That was harsh.”) and turn away before you give in to the temptation to lash out. Your son or daughter will almost certainly feel badly about having hurt you, especially since you haven't aroused their ire by attacking back. Later, when you aren't upset, use a light touch to tell your child how much you wanted to connect and how hurt you were. Reaffirm how much you love your child and want to be close, as well as your commitment to a home where everyone treats each other with respect. Then ask what he or she thinks is getting in the way of a loving relationship between the two of you.
- ◆ **Nurture your relationship with your child.** If you have already proven to be a good listener and that you are willing to be available anytime your child needs you, he or she will be much more likely to open up to you whenever something is up. When kids have a close and trusting relationship with their parents, then they won't need to worry about whether to trust them with delicate information. They also won't feel the need to seize a rare chance for power in the relationship by withholding info. Never waste a car ride or a simple task like folding laundry together. Simply being in the same room can create the opportunity for interaction. Stating your availability is also helpful (“I'll be in the kitchen making dinner if you want me”). Perhaps the most important part of staying available, however, is your state of mind. Your child will sense whether or not you are emotionally available so make a commitment, to yourself and your child, that you will be as available to him or her as possible.
- ◆ **Use indirect communication.** Kids often open more in the car, on a walk, or in the dark -- all times when eye contact is limited. Remember that these are great times to get kids talking. Another opportunity for indirect communication is when their friends are over, or in your car. Just keep your mouth shut and listen. Your child knows you're there, of course, but is often more willing to talk than if you were speaking directly.
- ◆ **LISTEN.** This is, of course, the single the most important part of helping kids open up. Don't talk, listen. Reflect back what they're saying so they know you understand, and then be quiet so they can talk more. If they don't keep talking, you can ask another question, but keep your tone companionable, not interrogatory.