



Talking with Teenagers

By Marilyn Suttle

Do you want a more satisfying relationship with your teenage children? Do you want to reduce conflict and pique their interest in your words of wisdom? Start by being a skillful listener. When teenagers talk, listen without the three C's; cutting them off, criticizing, and commanding. The three C's close down communication, and put your teenager at risk of tuning out your valuable adult perspective.

Listening without the three C's is a lot harder than it seems. Suppose your teenager says, "A police officer came to school today and wasted our time talking about an anti-drug program." A typical parent response, using the three C's, sounds like this:

Cutting them off - "Anti-drug programs are not a waste of time."

Criticizing - "Only a juvenile delinquent would put down an anti-drug program."

Commanding - "You are never to talk badly about your school's efforts to keep kids drug-free."

Communication ends with comments like these. Teens don't feel safe to share what's on their minds so they turn to other teens for advice.

Follow the thread of your teen's conversation, instead of jumping to conclusions while listening. Once you've heard what your teen is actually thinking, your response will be much more helpful. Remember to use judgment free language.

For example, Mom says, "It sounds like the officer's talk didn't sit well with you." Now Mom has encouraged her teen to say more.

Teenager: "All he did was talk about stuff I already knew."

Mom: "You would have preferred him to talk about things you haven't already heard?" Mom's words show she is listening. Her teen surprises her with a concern she didn't expect.

Teen: "Yes, like he didn't say anything useful, like what to do if your friend starts experimenting with drugs."

Mom: "That's a good question. Let's talk about that."

By leaving out the three C's, you create the kind of conversation that allows teenagers to feel comfortable confiding in you. Your teenager will be more willing to listen to your point of view with an open mind, if first you listen to their point of view. It may scare or upset you to hear their perspective, but the reality is, cutting them off, criticizing and commanding does not get rid of their opinions. Instead they go underground. When you listen without the three C's, you are in a better position to be helpful to your teenager.

It can be hard to keep from giving commands. When my teenager asked me to help him figure out how to sign on to a student website, we fiddled with it for about five minutes without any success. Then, I came up with a brilliant idea. I said, "Let's call the school and ask for help." My son didn't think it was brilliant at all. He refused.

I have to admit, when I think I have a great idea, it's hard for me to let go of it. It might have been easier for him to consider my idea or tell me why my idea wouldn't work if I had said, "Let's look at your options. You can call the school before it closes. That's one option, or maybe you can come up with something else." Instead, I commanded, "Don't waste any more time. Call the school now, before it closes."

The minute I said it, I cut off communication. Sure enough, he said, "I wish I hadn't asked you for help. I can figure this out without you." Okay, I had gone off course. The good news is, the minute you notice it, you have another shot at setting things back on track. I said, "Okay, I see that you don't like my idea. If there is another way to find out how to sign on to the website, I have confidence that you will find it." After a few minutes, he used instant messenger to ask someone in his class how to do it, and he successfully signed on.

Teenagers are empowered when you show confidence in them. I talked with a parent who had quite an insight to share. She said, "When I was a teenager, my mother was domineering. She tried to control everything. I rebelled, and began living a dangerous life style. When I was seventeen, I moved away from home, and into a bad situation. One day I received a letter from my Grandmother. She was a soft-spoken woman with a lot of wisdom. She wrote, 'Your mom has told me what's been going on. It sounds like you've been having a lot of problems lately. I believe you know how to take care of yourself dear. I have confidence that you will do what's right for you.' I read the letter, and moved back home the very same day. My Grandmother's confidence in me, affected me deeply."

Show confidence in your teenagers abilities. Your confidence will go a long way in helping them find courage. During the teen years, parents help best, not by fixing their kids problems, but by enabling teens to fix things for themselves.

It seems like it would be so much more efficient to just sit a teenager down, tell them everything you want them to know, and have them 'get it.' It doesn't work that way. The truth is, the more you talk, the less they listen. The more you listen, the more willing teenagers are to listen to you.

Marilyn Suttle helps parents create happier relationships at home and at work with esteem building communication and life balance strategies. Subscribe to her free monthly e-newsletter by visiting her web site: www.MarilynSuttle.com