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Communicating with Teens

Communicating with our teens is both essential and difficult: a tough combination. Learning to speak with, and listen to your child requires opening yourself to the possibility of a whole different language.

The language you have used until now has been borne of your own experience in life. What you notice in life continues to reinforce this way of seeing.

Psychologists tell us that we tend to disregard, without even thinking, anything that does not gel with our world picture. What we are being asked to do in order to foster a working relationship with our teen is to expand our world picture. This is like learning a whole new language. Learning a whole new language requires patience. I have been through this, I know. I also know that it is worth it.

When we first meet our child we are at an immediate advantage. We are bigger and, for better or worse, we are in charge. The clarity of the roles lends a harmony to the relationship that surprises us by coming under tremendous threat as our child enters the teenage years. Suddenly our child is almost as big as we are -- no size advantage -- and the possibility of real opposition rears its ugly head. We, who were hitherto accustomed to running the show, find ourselves captaining a leaky boat with an unruly crew conspiring below deck. Ah yes, these are the teenage years. And the victory goes only to those brave enough to change. Change what, you may ask? Change everything. Well, almost. After years of communication that has been so successful and cute that you have captured it on video, you find yourself harboring an alien in your midst. There is only one defense. Learn the language.

It has been said that we spend a great deal of our lives running away from the dragon of our deepest fear. Legend has it that if we dare to stop running and confront the dragon we will find ourselves staring into the fiery eyes of a true friend. Communicating with your teen is something like that. First you need to lose your fear of the unknown. This particular unknown has some unsightly habits like slouching itself all over your living room furniture, wearing a permanent scowl and regularly asking you for money.

Do you remember the terrible twos? This is the expanded edition. That was just practice, this is for real. Point number one for the terrible twos was to somehow pierce the veil of awfulness engulfing your child and move right on through to the lovable center. This same point applies to teenagers. They are going to be unlovable and you're going to have to hold onto that thin thread of love that binds you to them and refuse to let go. Know that you will be tested. But wait, there is a counterbalance. Step two for the terrible twos: be firm. The same applies to the teenager.

So, the new language:

1. Don't be afraid
2. Love
3. Be firm

The first step in learning a new language is listening to it so that you can repeat it. If you don't listen to it you won't know how to make the sounds. Your first step in communicating with your teens is to be still, and listen without judgment or interruption. You are creating something out of nothing. Building from the ground up. You are making an environment where the child feels safe to talk to you. This is priceless. The process will be challenging and you will sometimes have to nod when you want to shake your head and keep your mouth closed and smiling when your instinct is to allow your jaw to drop open with disapproval and shock.

Your teenager cannot know that you are fighting these inner demons of judgment and dismay. If you have done any acting at college or at high school it will come in handy now. Never lose sight of the goal. No matter what, you are going to reinvent yourself into someone that is capable of understanding the world of your teenager. You're going to do this as an act of pure will. I know families where this communication was the only thing that came between them and the threat of suicide, addiction and self-destruction. When there is a gap in the conversation and you open your mouth, let it be, more often than not, to frame a question.

Communicating with your teen is not unlike interviewing Howard Hughes or approaching a deer in the wild. When you have worn a path into this new territory it will become safer to voice opinions but only when a magical thing has happened. This magical thing is evident wherever true communication takes place. It is respect, and it comes from really listening, really hearing what is being said. Going through this rigorous process of establishing a new basis upon which to communicate will benefit you for the rest of you and your family's life on this planet. The result is priceless and the teenage years are the right time to begin the work.

Gail W.
Boulder, Colorado

Sentences: 61 Words: 877

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