

“ACTIVE LISTENING”

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Middle-school is a time of change and challenge for children and parents alike. As our children grow during the middle school years, they experience change physically, emotionally, mentally and socially in their transition from child to teenager. Research shows that during growth significant changes occur in areas of the brain that are responsible for self-control, judgment, emotions and organization, that do not fully mature until adulthood. Teens begin to strive for independence, self-identity, and a life separate from parents and home. They turn toward the outside world while we, as parents, want to maintain our relationships with them and continue to be a protective guiding support to them. Keeping the lines of communication open is especially important during the adolescent years – to maintain the closeness of our relationship with our children, and to help them be healthy and successful in their changing lives. Listening, really listening is a way to show our children that they are important enough to have our undivided attention and concern during this time of transition.

As parents, we tend to think that what we have to *say* to our children is of the utmost importance. After all, we’re adults, and want our children to perceive us as authorities. We tend to talk and talk and talk *at* our teens - and then we complain that our teens don’t listen to us, and that *they* don’t communicate with *us*. Teens, on the other hand, if asked what their biggest complaint is about their parents, are likely to say much the same thing – *they* don’t

listen to *me*! Is it any surprise then, that parent-child communication during the pre-teen and teen years is such a puzzle or a struggle? Who's really listening to whom?

Active listening – is a communication tool that parents and teens can use to create mutual understanding and clarity. *Active listening* is a skill that can be learned. It is a simple but powerful way for parents to strengthen communication with their teens and to help guide them to solve problems on their own. *Active listening* techniques include the following:

- **Ask thoughtful questions.** Listen to your teen's answers without interrupting, and without being judgmental about what s/he said. Closed-ended questions will limit the range of responses and suggest that you already know what is going to be said – for example, "Are you going to...?" On the other hand, open-ended questions will allow for a variety of responses, and possibly, for more information to be shared – for example, "How would having that affect...?"
- **Paraphrase and reflect back what you think you heard your teen say, and ask for confirmation or clarification.** Do not assume that you know what your teen means. Repeat this process until what was said and what was heard/understood match each other. For example, if your child says, "I hate my little brother; he's always listening at the door when my friends come over," you could say, "It sounds like you would really like your brother to respect your privacy when you're talking with your friends. *Is that correct?*" Or, "What did you mean when you said...?"
- **Empathize, whenever possible. See the issue from your teen's point of view.** Empathizing means that you, as a parent, have the ability to put yourself in your teen's shoes.

To empathize, you must temporarily ignore your own adult perception of the situation (for the moment) and accept your teen's thoughts, ideas and feelings of the situation as your own. Seeing it through your teen's eyes does not mean that you need to agree with, or give in to, your teen. It does mean, however, that you do not dismiss what your teen says as ridiculous or silly. Your acceptance and respect for your teenager's thoughts, ideas and feelings validates his/her identity as an individual human being, and increases the chance that your teen will talk to you about the problems or issues that s/he is facing.

The benefits of *active listening* make it a worthwhile strategy for parents of teens. *Active listening* cuts down on misunderstanding, improves engagement, and creates a non-judgmental atmosphere that is conducive to sharing. *Active listening* takes time, practice and awareness, and does not produce results overnight. With repetition, each time you and your teen talk, your conversation will get easier, feel more natural and will include more *active listening* – not just from you, but from your child as well – as you lead the way.