

Active Listening: A Communication Tool

By Daniel F. Perkins, Ph.D.

[This document is one of a series of the Family, Youth, and Community Sciences department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, December 1999.]

Overview

For teens and their parents, adolescence is a time of happiness and troubles. It is a time when an adolescent breaks from the past and, yet, retains some childhood behavior. As a parent of a teenager you may often feel as though your son or daughter is speaking a completely different language than you are. Still, listening to your children during their teen years is important because this is the crucial time when they are forming their identities and taking ownership of their own values and beliefs.

Active listening is vital part of parenting teens. Active listening is a communication tool that can help parents and teens speak with each other clearly and be understood. This document defines active listening skills and demonstrates how to use these skills to strengthen communications between you and your adolescent.

Three types of responses in active listening

Active listening is about focusing and concentrating on the person who is speaking. The way parents can show they are actively listening is to do the following:

- Ask good questions,
- Paraphrase, and
- Empathize with their teen.

First, as a parent, you train yourself to ask questions in a way that allows your teen to feel comfortable about answering truthfully—and about using his or her own terms. Second, you restate what you heard to make sure that you understood what your teen was saying. Finally, you need to take the time to see things through your teen's eyes and get some understanding of how your adult-in-process is experiencing a given situation.

a. Asking questions

Often questions can seem accusing or blaming to the person asked. A question may make the person feel backed into a corner. For example, if a parent asks his or her teenage son, "You didn't like the movie, did you?" it is clear that the parent does not approve of the movie and, if the teen *did* like the movie, he ends up feeling the need to defend his position. Consider how much easier it would have been to respond to the question "What did you think of the movie?"

Active listening requires the speaker to look at the hidden meaning behind the question. People often ask questions that might make others feel pressured into coming up with the correct response. For example, you might feel pressured when someone close to you asks, "Do you think I have gained weight?" These types of questions tend to put the person being asked on the defensive. Often the person may shut off communication in order to protect him or herself.

In order to be a good active listener, you need to make sure that you ask questions honestly and sincerely. And that the intent behind questioning is to understand rather than advise, criticize, or pry (the district attorney approach). Active-listening questions intend to:

- Clarify meanings:* "I hear you saying you are frustrated with Johnny, is that right?"
- Learn about other's thoughts, feelings, and wants:* "Tell me more about your ideas for the project."
- Encourage elaboration:* "What happened next?" or "How did that make you feel?"
- Encourage discovery:* "What do you feel your options are at this point?"
- Gather more facts and details:* "What happened before this fight took place?"

You can be fairly sure you are asking questions correctly if you:

- Do not assume you know what your teen means;* don't try complete the teen's statements or say, "I know just how you feel."

- Ask for clarification with questions such as: “What did you mean when you said I have been ‘unfair to you’?” or “You said she’s ‘crazy’—what do you mean by crazy? What does she do that is crazy?”
- Check your tone for sincerity. As you are talking to your teen, check that your tone of voice matches your feelings and body language. For example, a parent may sound angry when in reality he or she is concerned for his or her child. However, because the child hears anger he or she becomes more defensive and shuts the parent out.
- Ask open-ended questions that allow for a variety of responses. If you ask closed-ended questions, you limit the range of responses and suggest that you already know what is going to be said.
- Show interest in the speaker and the conversation by saying, “Tell me more about that” or “Keep going, I’m following you.”
- Don’t give advice until after you have asked for the person’s opinions on the situation, as in “What are some possible solutions to this problem?” or “What do you think should happen?”

b. Paraphrasing (re-stating)

Paraphrasing is a tool you can use to make sure that you understand the message that you think your teen is sending. It is restating the information you just received to make sure you understand it. For example, your son says, “I hate math and the teacher because she never lets us do anything cool!” You might say, “It sounds like you’re having a hard time with math and that makes you feel frustrated and bored.”

This technique helps parents and teen communicate in several ways:

- By restating or paraphrasing, parents draw further information from their teenage son or daughter,
- Paraphrasing lets parents’ son or daughter know that his or her parents have heard them and are interested in what he or she has to say, and
- It allows the teen an opportunity to correct any misunderstanding immediately.

The following are examples of paraphrasing dialogues (*paraphrased responses are italicized*):

EXAMPLE 1: A MOTHER AND SON ARE DISCUSSING HOW MUCH TV HE SHOULD WATCH DURING THE WEEK.

Mom: “Mike, I’m concerned about how much television you have been watching lately. I think we need to set up some kind of schedule to make sure you are doing your homework and other things besides watching television.” Son: “Maaahhhhhmm, I need to watch TV. All my friends watch this much television.”

Mom: “*You’ll feel like you’re missing out on something if you don’t watch all the shows your friends watch.*”

Son: “Yes!! Then I’ll be the big loser who doesn’t know what everyone else is talking about!”

Mom: “*If you don’t know what your friends are talking about, you’re afraid you’ll look dumb and they’ll make fun of you.*”

Son: “Exactly, Mom! You see this is why I just HAVE to watch all this TV.”

Mom: “*Hmm, I can see that TV is important to you, why don’t we talk more about what specific program you feel you need to watch and see if we can’t come up with a compromise.*”

EXAMPLE 2: A FATHER AND DAUGHTER DISCUSS CURFEW.

Dad: “Dawn, I’d like for you to come home at 1 a.m. from this party tomorrow night.”

Dawn: “Dad, there is just no way. The party is until 2 a.m. and I have to be there until the end.”

Dad: “*It sounds like this party is a big deal for you.*”

Dawn: “Yeah! Jason will be there ... and there’s going to be a live band ... and all my friends will be there! Dad, you just have to let me stay until 2.”

Dad: “*You’re excited about the party and want to make sure you have every opportunity to hang out with your friends and Jason.*”

Dawn: “Yes, I can’t come home before 2.”

Dad: “*I get that this party means a lot to you, and I am concerned about your safety. Let’s get more details about this party—and your ride there and back—and see if we can work something out we’re both comfortable with.*”

c. Empathizing

Empathizing means that, as a parent, you are able to put yourself in your teen's shoes. To empathize you must ignore your own adult perception of the situation for the moment and accept your teen's feelings, thoughts, and ideas of the situation as yours. See it with a teen's eyes—during your discussion.

- Empathizing does not mean you need to agree with your teen.
- Empathizing does not mean you need to give in to your teen or allow her or her to set his or her own rules—to avoid confrontation.
- Empathizing means you do not dismiss what your teen says as ridiculous or silly.

Your acceptance of your teenager's thoughts, ideas, and feelings increases the chance that your teen will talk to you about the problems and issues that he or she is facing. It is easy to know you are being empathic because:

- Your body language and tone match
- Your tone and your feelings match
- You are focused on what your teen is saying and meaning

You are trying to see things from your teen's point of view:

- You do not impose your feelings, thoughts, and ideas throughout the conversation
- You refrain from immediately giving advice
- You are tired after listening because it takes a great deal of energy
- You ask yourself if you would make that same statement to an adult. If not, then think twice about making it.

REMEMBER

Active listening takes time and practice and does not produce results overnight.

Usually, each time you and your teen talk, your conversation will get easier and will include more active listening—not just from you, but also from your child.

You, as the adult, have to lead the way.