



## Let's Talk

### Five Steps to Connecting with Your Teens

Do you ever get the feeling your teenager is from another planet? You're talking with her, she's nodding her head in acknowledgment, looking you straight in the eye, but somehow she's just not there. Have you ever walked away from a talk with your stepson or daughter feeling like you've just had two completely different conversations? The construction crew of the Tower of Babel probably had a better line of communication.

Though it may feel as if you are living in two different worlds, speaking two different languages, it is possible to have a meaningful relationship with your teenager, one where you can actually talk with them?connecting on a real level of communication.

Do you remember when you were fifteen or sixteen years old? I do. I thought I knew it all?at least I knew all I needed to know. I can still hear my mom repeating the same tired old clichés her mother told her. "Early to bed, early to rise." "Money doesn't grow on trees." "This is going to hurt me worse than it will hurt you!"

In my fifteen-year-old opinion, mom was clueless to the world I lived in. She would say, "Let's talk," and I would respond, "About what?" It never entered my mind to tell her any of my concerns or ask her opinion about a situation?the things that really mattered. Some things haven't changed much since we were kids. Most teens today see their parents the same way, and unfortunately this is one of the reasons why it is still difficult for parents and teens to make a meaningful connection.



This communication gap requires a bit of a stretch for most parents to overcome, and if you are a stepparent, the reach is even greater. Not only do stepparents have to gain entry into their teen's confidence, but in order to do so, they often have to lay aside the weight of emotions which come with blending a family.

By combining biblical wisdom, common sense, and a healthy dose of patience, these five steps are designed to help you overcome the communication gap. Follow them and make a connection with your teenage son or daughter. Let's talk!

### **Step One: Preparing the Ground**

After rearing six teenagers in a blended household, I learned a few things about preparing the ground for communication. Early on, I realized my own heart had to be open, teachable, and obedient to God's instruction if I wanted my kids to be open, teachable and obedient to me. So of course, the first step in preparing the ground for connecting with my teens began with me.

Removing obstacles for open communication requires a bit of soul searching. Identify resentments toward your stepchildren and let them go. If left unchecked, these obstacles will most definitely create a barrier for communication. Don't let your child's droopy pants, the fact that he hasn't cleaned his room, or outside influences such as his friends or your ex-spouse influence how you talk to them.

### **Step Two: Opening the Door**

More often than not, when we complain that our teenagers won't talk to us, what we are really saying is, "My teenager won't listen to me." In order to make a connection with your teen, the conversation has to be two-sided with mutual respect. Wait until they've completely finished telling you something before jumping in with advice or an opinion.



Show your teen you value their ideas and opinions by asking questions like: "How do you feel about this?" or "What do you think?" Then let them tell you. Inviting their perspective on a matter builds self-esteem?something many teens struggle with. If their ideas or opinions differ from yours, look for common ground. Communication breaks down if your child is put on the defensive.

Sometimes our kids tell us just enough to see how we will react. Listen first and freak out later. Gently lead them to a compassionate God who will guide them through every situation. God is relevant in today's society. He isn't afraid of tough issues and neither should we be. If we freak out, the connection is broken and the door is shut tight. If we've shown our teen we're going to really listen and talk about it, they're more likely to open up and tell us about a problem they are having with a friend or express their feelings about something one of their classmates is involved in. The door will be open and a connection will have been made.

### **Step Three: Keeping it Short**

What parent hasn't experienced the infamous rolling of the eyes? Sometimes I wonder if there isn't some secret teenage training camp out there showing our kids how to inappropriately respond to a parent's lecture: "Cross your arms, show minimal interest, and just as your parent starts to look the other way, roll your eyes!" Well, there may not be any secret teenage training camps out there, but believe me, every teenager knows the routine. Why do our kids show this kind of disrespect toward our wise counsel? The main reason is we have said too much. We repeat the same thing over and over again in thirteen different ways. In a teen's mind, they are screaming, "Enough already! I get the point!"

Apply the "50% Rule." Almost every parent says at least 50% more than he or she should. Yes, we want our child to get the point, but we need to recognize that they are old enough and smart enough to comprehend our point the first time we



make it. Keeping our end of the conversation short and simple opens the door for our kids to say more on their end.

#### **Step Four: Affirming and Encouraging**

They may not show it, but teenagers love and need to be praised. Despite their "tough guy" or "cool girl" appearance, teens are starving for affirmation. If they don't get it at home, they will look for it elsewhere.

Acknowledge the positive things your teenager does with a pat on the back or a word of thanks: "Thanks for taking out the trash when I asked you." "I appreciate your returning the change without my asking?why don't you just keep it." When Johnny gives the neighbor boy a lesson in shooting hoops, tell him, "You are so thoughtful!" or "I'm proud of you." Take notice. Point out his strengths. "You showed real leadership when you." Words of encouragement spoken regularly and with sincerity will invite communication.

#### **Step Five: Seizing the Moment**

Pay attention, look for the right moment to talk, and then seize it! If your child acts like they need some space, don't push yourself on them. A spontaneous conversation late at night when you tell them good night, or in the car on the way home from a game can result in the warmest and most rewarding talks. Capitalize on these moments and be around enough so you don't miss that connection with your teen.