

## Voice Lessons for Parents

### THE ART OF LISTENING TO TEENAGERS

Listening to anyone requires the excruciating practice of staying quiet and paying attention when you really, really want to be talking. The hectic schedule of most families adds an extra hurdle to listening to teens. Whether you're waiting out a torrent of gossip or trying to extract a few informative sentences, it all takes time, so factor that in to your approach. Then listen without defending yourself, correcting misperceptions, or apologizing. Listen to understand your child's perspective, not to decide whether it's accurate. Remember that listening does not imply agreement.

You and your children are not equals in ambition, experience, or street smarts. You want to stay close; they want to start moving on. As you listen, regard teenagers' phoniness and manipulative power plays as clumsy stepping-stones to separation. Curb any impulse to expose (and humiliate them for) their transparent excuses or shallow reflex apologies. It's easy to get defensive when they try to play you for a fool, but stay mum and let them have their say ("Mom, Dad, if I had known you guys would get upset. I *never* would have . . ."). As much as they may hope you're dumb, they know you're not. It's simply their job to try to get away with stuff, to lob and parry. Don't buy what they're selling, but don't retaliate with a character attack.

Reinforce your reputation as a serious listener by offering evidence. Recall their friends or rivals by name, and remark on specific situations they've told you about ("This reminds me of that time you and Sebastian walked the whole length of Golden Gate Park"). If the conversation offers you a chance, mention beliefs they've shared with you, for example, about injustice or karma. Don't use these convictions as evidence of a teen's double standards or your superior intellect, but as proof that you listened before and considered what he or she had to say important enough to remember—and that you are once again listening attentively.

You don't have to listen and respond in the same conversation. You can save your side for later. This is difficult because teens are

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insistent and their social lives are fluid. They want an answer NOW! By pausing the discussion you may displease not only your own child but possibly a horde of angry teenage zombies and their more lenient parents as well. No matter. If you need time to weigh the options, take it. You can bolster your confidence here by reminding yourself that you're being a great role model. When your child is being pressured by peers to "hurry up and take it . . . do it . . . grab it," she may recall your delayed response and say, "I need some time to think this over."

Finally, as critical as listening is, it's not always appropriate. Sometimes you can just say no. "Nobody's going to Lollapalooza. Not nobody. Not no how."

## OLD YELLER (THAT'S YOU)

I find myself talking parents off the ledge of shame and guilt far more often than I do teenagers. The cause? They yelled at their kid. Mostly I say some version of "What else is new? You're the third parent to sit on that couch today with the same confession."

Why do parents get mad at their teenagers for making them mad? And then hold a grudge, stop giving them the benefit of the doubt, and get even madder next time? And feel terrible about it but aren't able to stop? Parents lose their tempers with teenagers more frequently than with younger kids because they are scared *for* them and scared *of* them.

When the thread of trust and connection feels so thin, it's hard to push yourself to stretch it further by confronting your teen about wrongdoing, cutting off his funds or freedom, or saying anything that will make him angry with you. Moms don't want to be *that* mom, the out-of-control screamer. Dads don't want to be *that* dad, the man who doesn't respect women or bullies a boy. But because you're a parent and not a child psychologist or crisis counselor, you will inevitably lose your cool.

And to your horror, it may feel great! Being mad is much more invigorating than feeling sad, hopeless, or impotent. All that grief

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(about your child growing up and you growing old) is less painful when eclipsed by righteous anger. When this happens, try to apologize before the end of the day. Without defending yourself you can say, “I’m sorry I spoke that way. I said things I don’t actually feel because I care so much and want to [keep you safe, talk you out of your spiral of beating yourself up, or whatever the specific issue]. I ended up saying things that, when I thought them over, are not accurate or fair.”

Losing your temper occasionally is no reason to recuse yourself from the task of setting your teenager straight. I tell parents, “This is your job. Your kids are super smart and really dopey, and they do things that are devious and dangerous, and it’s up to you to correct and guide them. No one in the family you grew up in was a master of diplomacy, so you’re learning as you go.” Maybe some people were raised with articulate, soft-spoken, fair, and forthright parents, but I’ve never met any. So calm or not, carry on.

### TEXTING: TRAP OR TREASURE?

Texting gives teenagers a safe way to share feelings, ask embarrassing questions, or admit to mistakes. The distance can allow for more sincerity and playfulness than to face-to-face conversations. It also allows for breaking happy news.

*Mateo’s family wants me to go to Utah with them again this summer!  
Who got picked to be County Fair and Rodeo Ambassadors? Who’s  
getting a \$1,000 college scholarship???* Me! Me and Katie! Yup!  
*We did it, Mama!*

The best response to joyous texts? A short series of thumbs-up or confetti or shooting-star emojis unadulterated by flat-footed “where” and “when” questions. Those can wait until there’s time for a more expansive in-person conversation that includes both hugs and hollers and the gathering of essential details.

But—and I see this increasingly in the once sanctified space of my

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consultation room—to parents, every text represents a possible red alert. It must be glanced at, just in case. Parents become like a cross between 9-1-1 operator and Task Rabbit. Only a fraction of teenagers' texts are genuine emergencies, but determining which fraction is a challenge because (even with emojis) you can't hear your children's tone. You can't see their facial expressions. You can't tell if they're choking back sobs or off-loading a concern so they can move on with their day. So unless they are Shakespearian in their texting content, it's out of context.

The surest way for a young person to become a confident and articulate communicator is to talk, especially to adults. Texting a parent makes it too easy to avoid such interactions. One client's son, who was new to driving, found himself at a gas station and didn't know how to pop the cover of the gas tank. Instead of asking someone nearby for help, he texted his mom, who was in session with me. Naturally she checked his phone and told the boy how to do it.

The most productive and confident teenagers and adults I know turn off or ignore alerts when driving, in a meeting, or working on an assignment that requires concentration. If you consider your teenager's increasing independence a long-term project, I encourage you to experiment with waiting a few minutes or a half hour before responding to a worried or wondering text, even if you're free. This pause will give your teen a chance to recover from a spike in anxiety or the motivation to find needed assistance or information. (And they have no problem waiting fifteen minutes or forever to answer *your* texts.)

A tougher behavioral modification for most parents is to cut down on their own texting. I counsel parents to pause before texting their child and ask themselves, *Can this wait? What will be the effect on my child—on her independence, privacy, social and academic life—to have Mommy or Daddy intrude on her?* Yes, it's efficient. You just need a little piece of information and you know this is when she has lunch. But you don't know what she's doing at this moment. Is she flirting? Is she comforting a friend whose parents are getting divorced? Is she

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talking to a teacher? Is she together with her own thoughts, figuring something out or enjoying a daydream into which you are about to insert yourself?

Rather than offering parents a set of ironclad rules about texting, I suggest they view it in terms of family citizenship. When children send you a text, they may be interrupting you. When you text, you may be interrupting them. The family can talk together about situations that are appropriate for texting during the day. The basic criterion is “Can this wait until we’re together in person?” If it absolutely can’t, keep the message as brief and fact-based as possible: *When do you need me to pick you up?* The less emotion, the better.

These guidelines don’t apply to messages teens send to communicate things too heartfelt or difficult to say in person. In those cases, parents can respond quickly, with sensitivity, while still keeping their responses brief (in part because no digital communication is ever reliably private). The message can include appreciation that the child sent the message and a plan to continue the conversation in person: *Thanks for telling me. Talk tonight? XOXO.* This avoids the pattern I see so often, a frenzied back and forth, the teenager pleading or wheeling, the parent worn down and caving.

One final note on texting: don’t get cornered. Texting is a great example of the principle of “just because you can doesn’t mean you should.” Frantic texts lend themselves to impulsive responses rather than reflection (about how the request, rebuke, or information download makes you feel) and investigation (for facts that confirm or refute your hunches).

### LOST CONVERSATIONS: SIDE EFFECTS OF THE COLLEGE QUEST

A fifteen-year-old girl told me, “Every conversation with my mom feels like either a celebrity interview or a police interrogation.” Teenagers need physical and emotional space. They need unstructured, adult-free time to learn to navigate their colorful inner world and the outer world as well. Today’s teenagers also need to learn how

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to articulate what's on their mind. From formal research and casual feedback from employers, it's become clear that this generation communicates much better via text or online than in person. Learning to speak with ease and confidence is a skill that will absolutely give your child an advantage later in life. But if all you're talking about is school, the conversations will be tense and abbreviated. The teen will withhold what really matters to her, closing off an opportunity to delve into complex thoughts and feelings with a willing grown-up.

Among the families I see in session and meet during visits to public and private schools, certain patterns have emerged that are directly related to the parents' obsession with academic performance and college admissions. Test prep, test scores, which schools, how many—the relentless pursuit creates friction and highjacks opportunities for in-depth, heartfelt, mutually enjoyable dialogue. It dramatically degrades conversations between parents and their children.

My teenage patients have reacted to the pressure by becoming little psychoanalysts, able to dissect their parents' every frown and sigh. But ask them about themselves, and they shift into polite job-interview mode, formal and guarded. Like poker players avoiding the tell, they don't dare reveal their tentative passions or passing interests for fear their parents will smell résumé fodder and pounce (“You should do something with that!”). I recall a fifteen-year-old boy whose mother dropped him off for a session. She was no longer in the building, much less in the room with us. Still, he learned close to me when he whispered, “Guess what? I'm writing a play.”

Many teenagers get lost to themselves because their parents require so much emotional tending. Some (usually boys) go on strike, refusing to study or turn in assignments. It's what union organizers call “malicious compliance”: they show up but don't work. Others, ever watchful and captive to their parents' need for status and security, joylessly overwork and even overplay (in competitive sports and/or frenzied rounds of socializing) until both their bodies and spirits are broken. I wish this were true only for the delicate outliers, but these are trends I see swiftly becoming the norm in my practice.

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Amid the rush to college acceptance, parents sacrifice the chance to observe their child evolving. They may think they know their son or daughter because they've brainstormed together about AP classes and community-service points, but they underestimate their spirit guide. Beneath their parents' radar, teenagers are hosting backyard concerts, doing photo shoots, creating webisodes, making beer from hops they planted by the side of the house. They can learn anything online, so they're following their interests and developing sophisticated skills and communities. Parents who are secure enough can watch this parade without getting judgmental or overinvolved, recognizing that self-expression is not a waste of time. Compassionate detachment is an excellent way to encourage teenagers' exploration of themselves.

"Parents try to fix too many mistakes before they happen. Let us enjoy failure so we can improve! Let me fail once," an articulate twelve-year-old boy lamented. Another said, "I'm just trying to warm up, to find out what I'm capable of." And a fourteen-year-old girl echoed the frustration of many others when she recounted this exchange: "I said to my mom, 'I hate it how my friends complain about getting B's. They think their life is over,' and Mom said, 'Why don't *you* feel that way?'"

## TAMING THE TOPIC OF COLLEGE

Families caught up in the college race don't see how it creates shame and fear in their children (if they don't get into the "right" school) and resentment over all the time spent in test prep, which emphasizes tricks and memorization over intellectual depth. In the spirit of reducing unnecessary anguish and protecting students from having their high school years hijacked for the sake of their future, parents can take the lead in keeping the college campaign sane and realistic.

Since your community of peers is likely infected with the virus, gain perspective by reading about the financial, spiritual, and moral price of an overheated credentialing race. Try Yale professor William Deresiewicz's manifesto *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the Amer-*

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*ican Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* and Frank Bruni's *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*.

To prepare for conversations about college selection, open your eyes to the child before you. Reflect on the questions below, which deviate from the usual “prep to meet your high school college counselor” worksheet.

- What did your child like to do when he was five or six or seven?
- In which kinds of environments does he seem both relaxed and invigorated?
- Is your child pushing for a particular type of school to compete with or distinguish himself from a sibling? To please you? To displease you?
- Is there a field of study he's expressed interest in but not yet been exposed to? A part of the country or world he's drawn to?

After you've had a few chats on these topics with yourself or your child, give him a book that will help him investigate his interests or appetites. It doesn't have to be about colleges; it could be a book about a particular state or city or field of study. There's so much college information online that a printed book can serve as a refreshing way to focus on just one enjoyable aspect of the search. It also signals your support of his individual passions over the pedigree of the schools. If he ends up with some eccentric choices on his wish list, let him pursue them (if the financials add up) but require him to pay the application fee.

When touring schools, always wait for your child's response before offering yours. Heed her gut reaction to the campus. My younger daughter had a Goldilocks experience: she described the students at one school we visited as “too happy,” at another as “too sad.” A half hour into our visit to her future alma mater she said, “Mom, this is home.”

Remind your teenager that every acceptance involves an element of luck or an inside game (for example, status, influence, or wealth of the parents). Statistics about transfer rates can mollify a teen's



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disappointment or worry—one third of college students transfer to another school before graduating. Your child may or may not end up loving the college he attends, but if he doesn't like it, he can always switch to another school.

For students, the process of deciding where to apply to college, waiting to hear, and being accepted or rejected is like dating naked and getting your heart broken in public. It's especially hard because so much seems to be riding on their decision, yet they're too young to really know themselves. Your adult perspective and level-headedness are their anchor in this hurricane.

Last but crucially important: make the dinner table a college-free zone. You already have a family rule not to use phones during meals; make it include no talking about college, and see how the conversations expand into more varied and interesting territory. This also limits the collateral apprehension younger siblings will experience as they gird themselves for their own college marathons.

### THE MISSING LINK MAY BE SLEEP

Next to college-admissions madness, lack of sleep has the most unrecognized detrimental effect on the relationship between parents and teenagers. It's not uncommon for parents to mistake their teenagers' sleep deprivation for a mood disorder, attention deficit disorder, or impaired memory. Panicky parents show up at my office when a teen's disposition or productivity tanks or when every conversation devolves into a fight. One of the first things I ask them about is sleep. Teens need an average of nine to ten hours a night. Studies of children and teenagers have shown that poor sleep habits can lead to increased anxiety, depression, and impulsive behavior.

Getting by on just a few hours of shut-eye has become both a tactic for time management and a badge of honor among teenagers. Interviewing students about how much sleep they get, I was reminded of Navy SEALs or Army Rangers. One soberly stated, "I get ten hours," but the rest reported, "I get six," "I get four," "I don't get any, ever!"

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For adults, sleep prevents excessive weight gain by allowing the body to process carbohydrates efficiently; strengthens the immune and cardiovascular systems; and protects against depression and irritability. All good. All worthy. But for teenagers, who are developing physically and laying down neural tracks that will last a lifetime, the benefits of sleep are more extreme. One example: during sleep, electrical signals in the hippocampus (the memory center of the brain) reverse their direction, going backward to “edit” unnecessary information from that day’s input and reset the synapses so they can better absorb new information the following day. This is critical for teens, who are still growing and are tasked with a heavy load of learning. Sleep also increases response time in athletic performance. It literally refreshes teenagers’ minds, bodies, and spirits.

Studies of adults show that when people who normally get seven or eight hours of sleep reduce it to five or six, they eventually become convinced they have adapted to the loss. But University of Pennsylvania sleep researcher Philip Gehrman reports, “If you look at how they actually do on tests of mental alertness and performance, they continue to go downhill. So there’s a point in sleep deprivation when we lose touch with how impaired we are.”

One way to determine if teenagers aren’t getting enough rest is by how often they get sick, because sleep-deprived people are more susceptible to illness. If your teen is sleeping little and frequently falling ill, have a discussion about which activities can be scaled back. They may resist because they don’t recognize how impaired they’ve become. Through trial and error, find a way to make adjustments. Like adults, some teenagers are larks and some are owls, so take that into account when devising a sleep schedule with your child.

### CALMING A TROUBLED TEEN—AND KNOWING WHEN THE TROUBLE IS SERIOUS

The average teenager is regularly flooded with dark emotions—shame, anger, hopelessness, helplessness. At these moments you may be

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tempted to try to minimize her sense of doom and remind her of the joy she's felt in the past and is sure to feel again. This isn't helpful because her capacity to think is frozen. She's stuck in an unbearable present, and imagining a vague future happiness is too abstract.

Jaime Lowe, in a piece for the *New York Times* called "How to Talk to a Stranger in Despair," interviewed crisis-negotiation specialist Mary Dunnigan about her techniques for talking suicidal people off ledges. With some modifications these strategies are surprisingly apt for talking teenagers through their emotional turmoil. The key is to keep the conversation going even when your child is making scary threats, using distorted and illogical assumptions, or catastrophizing. Try these tactics:

- Listen attentively without interrupting.
- Don't criticize.
- Don't try to argue her out of her funk using common sense.
- Don't try to solve the problem right then and there.
- Repeat simple, comforting phrases such as "I'm listening," "Ouch," "That sounds rough."
- Say, "Let's take a minute because I want to make sure I understand. What I think you're saying is that your art history teacher plays favorites. Is there more to it?"
- Gently and tentatively offer a longer view. "His class will end at spring break and you'll never have to take anything else with him, is that right?"
- Try to turn the teen's attention to a small problem or discomfort that can be attended to right away. Is she hungry? Feeling grimy? Would a hot shower help? ("You have to get them to feel the cold and get hungry, so they're not only thinking about their internal despair," says Sergeant Dunnigan.)

Occasionally (but not as often as the more hysterical corners of the Internet would suggest), a teenager falls into serious despair or depression. It's trickier to know when to worry about teenagers than it is

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about younger children because the teens are so secretive. Still, there are signs that will let you know it's time to seek the help of a professional.

*Are they hiding in their room more than usual?*

All teenagers escape to their rooms, but if you notice a drastic increase, you may want to pay closer attention to what's happening in the rest of their life.

*If they consume a lot of social media or games, are they mostly just observing?*

Research has shown that this behavior signals a higher risk for depression and anxiety because the teens are making social comparisons but not using the sites to connect. In order to figure out if this is the case, you'll need to discreetly ask about their online habits, since any sites or apps that matter to them will probably be blocked to you. Listen for what they say they've discovered online, who they've met, what they're doing. Does it sound like an active portal into a community that's exciting and matches their interests, or like passive consumption? This may not be obvious. For instance, one thing boys do that puzzles parents is watch videos of other people playing video games. That's passive, but it's also fun and he's learning new gaming strategies. You can always ask in a genuinely curious tone, "What is it you like about watching |X|?"

*Are they participating in class?*

Some students are always more outspoken and engaged than others. To find out if your child's behavior has changed or if she seems to have mentally checked out, confer with one or more of her teachers.

*Have their grades dropped?*

Grades that are significantly lower than what is normal for your child may be a sign of emotional distress, but it may also mean that the student's workload is too heavy. Because parents are so focused on children taking the most advanced curriculum they can, it's common

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for the kids to be placed in classes for which they're not developmentally ready. They're overwhelmed but ashamed and afraid because they've swallowed the Kool-Aid, too. The stress, shame, and fear can result in depression.

*Have they withdrawn from friends?*

It's normal for middle- and high-schoolers to shift alliances, but pay attention to excessive isolation.

*How do they act around younger siblings or cousins and extended family members?*

Does your child's sweetness still come out, or has he or she gotten distant and hard?

*Are there signs they could be injuring themselves?*

This is more a problem among girls than boys. If they're cutting themselves, they'll wear long sleeves, pants, or long skirts when the weather calls for lighter attire.

*Are they losing weight or going on extreme diets?*

You'll see evidence of the weight loss, but the teen will deny the reason for it. It's common for teens with eating disorders to tell their parents, "I already ate."

*What do the grandparents say?*

If your child is close to his grandparents, ask them about this list. Maybe they've noticed (or your child has confided to them) something you've missed.

To ascertain whether your teenager could benefit from some sessions with a psychologist, look at his behavior in as many environments and get feedback from as many observers as you can without being overly intrusive in the child's world. If the different pieces

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of information form a troubling pattern, you'll want to make an appointment with a specialist who works with teenagers. You don't have to bring your son or daughter to the initial meeting. Just tell the therapist, "This is what we're seeing. Should we be worried? Do you want to meet with my child?"

### WHAT TEENAGERS WISH THEIR PARENTS KNEW

When I give a lecture, I frequently spend part of the afternoon interviewing small groups of local middle- and high-school students about what they want their parents to know. At first their good sense, generosity, humor, and insight startled me. Now I just expect and enjoy it. Before we dive into specific tactics for talking with teenage boys and girls, take a look at what students from around the country would say to their parents if they had the chance.

*What do your parents worry about that they don't need to?*

"They think bad grades wipe out good. They don't understand that when you judge us it just adds to judgment by classmates, teachers, college-admissions people, and ourselves."

"They worry, but I'm already worried. Or they ask if I'm worried when I've decided, 'I'm just going to see how it goes.'"

"They expect me to be as smart as my brother."

"They ask too many questions. 'Who did you sit with at lunch? What did you eat? Tell me everything that happened between eight and three.'"

"They ask, 'Who are you texting? What are you texting about?'"

"They think you have to save the entire country of Darfur to get into Yale."

*What's one piece of advice you would like to give your parents?*

"If I ask you to check my spelling and maybe grammar, it doesn't mean I want you to rewrite the paper."

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“There’s a difference between pressure and motivation.”

“My room is my temple.”

“Don’t act like there are only two positions at any moment:  
ahead or behind.”

“Just because you were wild doesn’t mean I’m going to murder  
someone or get someone pregnant.”

“Please listen instead of thinking up the next thing you’re  
going to say.”

“Ask about my life, not just my grades. Say, ‘How are you?’”

“Keep doing what you’re doing, but calm down.”

(A version at EVERY school) “Chill!”

*What are the sweetest things your parents do that they may not realize  
you appreciate?*

“When my favorite kind of ice cream just appears in the  
freezer.”

“My dad watches *The Walking Dead* AND *Family Guy* with me.”

Fiercely blushing tiny sixth-grade girl: “This will sound lame,  
but I love it when Dad tucks me in an extra l“ittle bit if  
he comes home late. Even though I’m already tucked in.”

“When Mom talks to me about the world and not about  
college.”

“She texts before a test, *Good luck, I love you*, instead of texting  
after. *How did you do?*”

“Mom gives me tiny surprises, like a ring shaped like a pancake  
that was pancake-scented.”

“Dad says to Mom, ‘Let him.’”