

Do your kids want to talk to you or do they feel that talking to you is like talking to a "brick wall?" It is essential that parents learn to listen to and respond effectively to children, especially when they reach adolescence. All sorts of concerns and issues arise during the pre-teen and teen years. Parents, who can listen and communicate effectively,

are more likely to have a positive influence on their child's values, choices and behavior.

One way parents can be more effective is to avoid communication styles that shut down conversations. The following kinds of communication are not effective because they tend to make the child defensive and resistant. In the examples below, the parent is trying to communicate with the child about a homework problem. In each case, put yourself in the child's shoes and consider how you would feel if you heard this message.

Communication closers

1. **Giving orders** - Telling a child to do something in a manner that it gives him little or no choice.

Example: Just do your homework.

2. **Making threats** - Telling your child that if the behavior continues certain negative consequences will happen.

Example: If you don't do your homework, there will be no television.

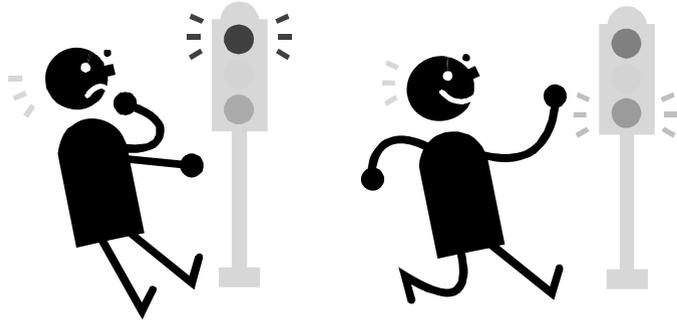
3. **Preaching** - Telling your child what she ought to do.

Example: You have to be responsible for your school work.

4. **Lecturing** - Trying to influence your child with facts, information and logic.

Example: The teacher gives you homework to help you keep up with the subject matter and prepare you for tests.

Stop and Go Words



5. **Giving advice** - Telling your child how to solve her problem.

Example: I suggest you go find a quiet place to do your homework.

6. **Criticizing** - Making a negative evaluation of your child's behavior or attitude.

Example: Your problem is that you're just disorganized.

7. **Interrogating** - Asking questions that put your child on the defensive.

Example: Why can't you get yourself organized?

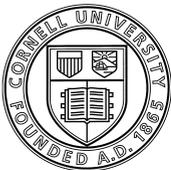
8. **Changing the subject** - Trying to distract your child or yourself from the real problem.

Example: How about a snack?

9. **Sympathizing** - Devaluing your child's feelings or problem by trying to make the child feel that they aren't so bad or unusual.

Example: I've been there and I know how you feel. Or: Things are going to get better.

~Continued~



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10. Being sarcastic - Trying to defuse a tense situation or motivate your child with misplaced humor.

Example: I guess you could do your homework if you only had a brain.

If you put yourself in the receiver's shoes, then most of these communication techniques probably make you feel bad - about yourself and the sender. What can parents do instead? There are other skills that can help open doors to communication. These techniques validate a child's feelings and accept his point of view. They encourage the child to keep talking and derive his own solutions to problems. We call these techniques "communication openers."

Communication openers

1. Attending - Showing that you are interested and attentive through your non-verbal and verbal cues.

- Non-verbal: Leaning forward; direct eye contact
- Verbal: Expressions like "Uh huh," "I'd like to hear about it," and "Tell me more."

Example: Tell me more about what's bothering you.

2. Open-ended questions - Encouraging your child to explore the topic or problem further by asking non-threatening questions. Open-ended questions help:

- start a conversation
- encourage the speaker to tell more
- help the listener understand better
- clarify the feelings behind the words

Example: How do you feel when you don't understand the homework assignment?

3. Paraphrasing - Restating in your own words what you just heard your child say.

Example: What I hear you saying is that you don't really know what your teacher expects.

4. Reflective responding - Reflecting not only the content of what is being said, but also the feelings that underlie the words.

Example: It sounds like you're pretty frustrated with school.

5. Feedback - Sharing your reactions, thoughts and feelings in a honest, gentle and non-judgmental way.

Example: It seems like this homework business has you very upset but I'm confident you can find a solution to this problem.

6. Summarizing - Concluding a conversation by restating the main points and any agreements reached.

Example: Let's see. We talked about several things. You're frustrated with your homework assignments and that you don't always understand what's expected. Also, you feel that you don't get a lot of help at home. I agreed to get you a desk for your room and you agreed to do your homework right after school. I'll check your work and help when you ask. And you'll make sure you understand the teacher's instructions. Does that sound ok to you?

Improving your ability to talk with kids often means replacing poor communication habits with better ones. It also means respecting and appreciating each child and being willing to suspend your judgment to understand the child better. Begin by using more "go" communication techniques and fewer "stop" ones.

Source: Tim Jahn, Human Development Specialist, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.

HD 83