

Take time to listen, it speaks volumes to your child

Parents who actively listen help nurture a strong relationship that can protect their kids from using alcohol and other drugs

“The first duty of love is to listen.” – Paul Tillich, theologian and philosopher

By Emily Moser

As parents, we play a huge variety of roles: provider, teacher, cheerleader, boundary-setter, to name a few. Each is critically important in helping children grow and mature. Add to that list chief listener.

The ability to effectively listen to our kids is a bedrock component of building a strong, trusting relationship with them. And that, in turn, is a key to helping them make healthy choices when it comes to decisions like whether to use alcohol and other drugs. In fact, research shows teens are less likely to drink when they have a close, supportive tie with a parent or guardian.

As parents, we tend to put a premium on our kids listening to us. Naturally, we want to guide them safely around the brambles that can snag them on the path through the adolescent and teen years, and we want them to hear about and learn from our experiences and heed our advice. Given the busy schedules of today’s families, we sometimes can be in such a rush that we feel we barely have enough time to tell our kids what we feel we need to impart and instead inadvertently miss invaluable opportunities to listen. But it’s important for us to remember that the degree to which our children listen to us is directly related to the degree to which we listen to them.

Consider these strategies that, in the end, will help you build a stronger relationship with your child:

- *Consider yourself the learner.* Kids are a wealth of information about the challenges and influences young people face today, who and what’s popular and why, and other subjects. Ask open-ended questions, listen without interrupting, be enthusiastic and encourage them to share by using phrases such as, “Tell me more about that.”

- *Be flexible about the direction of the conversations.* Remember that the conversation with your child revolves in large part around what they have to say and their perspectives – in effect, communicating on their level. You can then tailor your messages accordingly. Be open to sharing your experiences, but remember that kids might not want to go down the “when-I-was-your-age” road.

-Find common ground. You may not agree with everything your child tells you, but your ability to hear what they say – whether it’s about their beliefs or interests – and to respond in an honest and loving way will help you develop a stronger connection. No doubt, this is a huge challenge, particularly during the teen years when kids’ attitudes and personalities can undergo a quantum shift. But ultimately, a stronger bond will set the stage for you to establish, together with your kids, the shared values, family rules and boundaries so vital to helping them make healthy choices.

-Continually reach out. Adolescents and teens may not always want to talk, and when you’re in tune with your child you’ll know when these times arise. But remind them frequently that you’re there and available to listen. They may not always say it, but they appreciate it.

-Do fun stuff as a family. Whether it’s being outdoors, watching a movie or going to a favorite sports event, make it a regular activity. Have a parent-child date night. Eat dinner together regularly. Being together, outside the rush of daily life, fosters conversations and better connections, and that will help you stay in tune with your child’s needs as they grow.

If you have a success story to share about talking with and listening to your child, I’d like to hear from you. I’ll share them in a follow-up article and, if you’d prefer, I won’t use your real name. Parents can learn a great deal not only from their kids, but from our shared experiences.

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