

# Talking with the Non-Talkers

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*Within the feedback from the previous presentation on Adolescent Development a number of parents spoke about their concerns regarding communication and its apparent breakdown between them and their teenagers. This presentation is in response to that and draws from my own experience working therapeutically with teenagers and parents in addition to information drawn from various sources noted below.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps you have noticed that your interactions with your teen are deteriorating? Maybe fast becoming nonexistent and certainly not what they used to be. Yet as parents you are not going away and neither is your teen (for the time being) so some form of communication *has* to happen. It is not possible to not to and so this presentation involves thinking about why that is. It will look at the continuum between them and you and try answer the questions: **Is it all them** and all their issues? **Is it all you** and yours? Or is it a combination of the two. We will also then look at **some tips and techniques** to hold in mind when engaging with your son/daughter. The intention is to look at the small changes that can be made that might shift the trajectory away from the explosive arguments and back towards a greater connectedness between you and your non-talking teen.

## **IS IT ALL THEM?**

It certainly can feel like it when all you get are the shortest answers possible.

*Did you hand in your project today? Yes. Did the teacher say anything? No. How did it look in comparison to everyone else's projects? Fine!*

**Fine** is the default response for every question.

*How was the party? Fine. How you doing today? Fine.*

Everything is always just fine. Yet *fine* tells us nothing. However it can be useful to think about what is probably meant when they say F.I.N.E. What they are probably really saying is that they feel: Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional. Surprisingly accurate most of the time.

Another feature you encounter is **the closed door**. Teenagers are over sensitive about privacy and offer only the most limited and sparse information possible.

*When is that Maths test? Next week sometime. What is it on? Don't know, geometry. How are you feeling about it? Fine. And when are you planning to study for it? LATER!! And then slamming of doors!*

**Avoidance** is another key characteristic of teenagers. They will look grumpy, agitated, and irritable yet will refuse to acknowledge it. They will avoid talking about anything they do not feel they want to. Or they will just plain reject your gestures or suggestions. **They give you “bat”**.

*Why don't you all come over here tonight? Err... No. Why would we want to do that?*

*I was talking to James's mom and she was saying how he was really looking forward to going to the party this weekend. Are you? Silence... Who is going? Just some people. Anyone I know? James. I know James is going, anyone else. Don't know, and why you being so over-involved??!!*

All reasonable questions but they tell you almost nothing, it is like getting water from a stone.

### **WHY DOES THAT HAPPEN**

Something important about this stage in your child's life that needs to be understood and accepted is that they are wanting to and needing to become more independent. **Independence is Necessary!** They need to find their own voice, their own opinions and make their own decisions. Also, the external world, their peers and social environment becomes the benchmark and the definitive voice when thinking feeling and deciding what is important. Essentially they are not letting you as parents in because they have this feeling inside of them that says that they need to be doing things on their own. This means that as they try to need you less and start doing this by talking to you less.

Another factor is that their **self esteem** is in a constant state of flux – they feel good one minute and pretty lousy the next. It is a confusing and unsettling time. It is therefore not appealing to have to talk to their parents about it because it will more than likely make them connect to these feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that they are trying to avoid. They are also working really hard to try and forge a relationship and a connection to their external world and peer group. They are no longer looking to their family for reassurance or a sense of self worth. They look more to their friends for support and affirmation and it becomes really hard to turn back to their families when they are trying so hard to move away.

Teenagers also want **to rebel**. They want to reject their family as they try out being independent and what better way to do it than ignore and stone-wall the whole family. What they say and share with you is one thing that they have complete control over and that feels great. The reality is that they often don't manage it all and make mistakes and get into trouble. However this is not a sign that they will stop trying as it is through the mistakes that they learn about themselves and their abilities. They will tell you less so that they can try and manage more alone.

### **IS IT ALL YOU?**

An important question to ask is if there is any part you play in keeping the walls of silence up and secured between you and your teen. Your task as parents is difficult and immensely challenging, no one will argue that! All you want is to make these bundles of joy into good, responsible and successful adults. However, the stress, the pressures and moments of panic mean that very often your efforts slip into **focussing on the negatives**, the mistakes, the failures.

*Why did you do so badly in Science? Why didn't you sms me like I asked you to?*

Meanwhile spending far less time noticing that he improved in English and Maths or that he was right on-time in meeting you where you had arranged. A family therapist I once worked with explained to parents of a young girl who refused for the most part to even be in the room as them that, *“For every negative comment there needs to be nine positives.”* The family's response was that it was more like the opposite. Positives comments were seldom heard in their family. It is basic

behavioural science, much like Pavlov and his dogs. If by pushing the red button with his nose a dog will have a pellet of food drop into his cage, he will quickly learn to keep on pushing the red button. The same applies to teenagers; if interactions with his parents make him feel good about himself, he is far more likely to want to have a few more. However, if the talks with his parents are characterised by negatives and criticism then it seems pretty sensible to try avoiding them as much as is possible.

Some parents find it very hard to resist the urge to jump in to try and **fix the mess**. Perhaps it is because they have their own worries and concerns. Perhaps they are full of stresses from their own life and don't have space for any more. Or perhaps it is because they quickly start to feel angry, irritated, and anxious in conversations with their teen and so want to resolve things quickly. Parents often feel compelled to fix the problem, jump in with answers, offer lots of advice and dictate what and what not to do.

Another common occurrence is that when parents see that their child is unhappy or distressed they want to quickly **save them from the feeling**. It is really difficult to see their child upset or hurt, feeling disappointed or let down, and it becomes easier to share more of their thoughts, ideas, and opinions to try and take away the feeling. The hope is that if they talk more their son will feel less.

Parents can also be **too quick to understand**. They think that they have got it the gist of the story; they believe they know what is going on and start making assumptions and responding accordingly. The conversation becomes one way. There is a good chance when talking to teenagers that there is another layer to their story which if given space to explain will become more apparent. However, when teens feel that they are not being understood and parents are jumping to conclusions before they've even had a chance to finish talking, it quickly becomes a negative experience and will be avoided.

All in all parents become too big a presence in conversations with their children; they take up most of the space. What this means is that the teenager often is left feeling they are not fully heard, listened to, or understood and are denied the opportunity to develop their own thoughts and solutions. The space for their experience is closed down.

### **WHAT IS GOING ON?**

A major aspect of communicating with teenagers is the feelings that are generated in the process. The teenagers will disagree, be rude, forget, make mistakes and all of these behaviours will elicit strong **feelings in the parent**. Effective communication with teens is strongly influenced by how well you can keep these feelings under their control. Being able to stay calm and in an adult headspace rather than being controlled and sucked into the messy adolescent headspace plays a significant part in allowing conversations to not end in arguments and slamming of doors.

If you can **anticipate and expect to feel**: shock, horror, disappointment, anxiety, worry, guilt, embarrassment, fury, it puts you in a far stronger position to control it and not let it cloud your reactions and responses. By expecting it you will be less likely to get sucked in.

*Ah-ha here is that irritation I have felt before, deep breath, let me keep listening and thinking about what is being said here.*

A quick aside about the deep breath – I did some work with a younger boy earlier in the year, he was 10 years old, and he got really angry in school so we had this strategy where when he felt himself getting angry he would imagine where the feeling was in his body and then take a deep breath into where that feeling was hotting up and cool it back down. It was in his tummy ☺ It works, try it.

Taking a breath creates a break, a space between the feeling and the reaction, and gives you time to think.

It is not helpful to deny it or pretend the feeling is not there. Parents must own it and **acknowledge it**. Same with this young boy, he was angry and that was important and needed to be responded to but we developed a plan that meant he didn't make matters worse by reacting in his angry mood. He would walk away, go and play a game, or go and tell a teacher another boy was teasing him. It is about feeling the feeling and not reacting out of it. By remaining calm it is far more likely that the conversation will continue. In doing so you are also teaching and modelling appropriate expression of emotion for your son. Teenagers will bring parents their chaos because they are still learning to contain it. However if the reaction they get adds to this feeling of chaos they very quickly feel overwhelmed and the conversation is over.

In talking to and engaging with teenagers there are very often **huge feelings** involved. Certainly some of the strongest feelings I have felt in my therapy room have been in sessions with teenagers. There is something raw and unprocessed about teenager's feelings. Perhaps it is because they link so strongly with our own memories of feelings of frustration and injustice from being that age; it may also have to do with the anxiety that we feel in relation to the teenager's apparent belief that they can do as they please and need not worry about the risks or dangers of it all. It is a scary time and that is important to know as it needs to be tolerated in your relationship with your son. Teenagers will unsettle and may even scare you with the way they think and the choices that they make. However, as long as they feel they can connect to and be accepted by their parents and not be blasted away by the reactions they get, they are in a far better position to be able to have the conversations and communications necessary to help them through this up-and-down time.

### **IT IS A TWO WAY PROCESS**

In essence what is required is that interactions are nurtured. It is about making interactions with teenagers a place where they can begin to trust that they can share their experiences and not be judged, criticized, or made to feel stupid. Open communication is far more possible if the teenager feels that they can be themselves and be fully accepted for what that is. If the primary aim in talking to teens is to keep the channels of communication open then it makes sense to be thinking about what can be done to make them **want to come back**, want to talk more.

If they feel it has been a positive experience...	They will do it again.
If they feel heard and understood...	They will do it again
If they feel respected and acknowledged as a person...	They will do it again
If they feel valued and important...	They will do it again
If they feel they can trust the experience...	They will do it again

If having them talk more is the objective then surely trying to bring those experiences into conversation can make a significant difference.

The reality is that this is not always possible and a lot of the time teenagers will feel like they were not heard, not listened to, not respected because they did not get what they wanted out of the discussion. They will not always get what they want. However, if there is a constant thread that runs through the interactions of love, interest and **efforts to understand** it will be experienced as such. Despite not getting the outcome they had hoped, by feeling respected and listened to it allows the doors of communication to remain open and become more likely to come back and in the future.

Another key feature in making sure teenagers stay linked with their parents during their efforts towards independence is **the relationship**. This is a two way process where if parents want their sons to have a relationship with them, they need to have a relationship their sons. From my

experiences in working in adolescent units in London with the young people who had given up on adults a long time ago (and for many it was with good reason) it became very clear that the only way they would listen or engage with you was by working really hard at building the relationship. It was only then that they would consider letting you into their world. This highlighted how without a relationship the channels for connection do not exist. Relationships require effort which is nothing new, and if the hope is to communicate more with your son (or daughter) working at the relationship is essential. Parents need to be open to understanding their teenagers experience and to be willing to make the effort to do so.

Like relationships, **respect** is another of the two way processes. If you want them to respect you, you will need to respect them. A quick thought on respect and what that means in relating to teenagers is that they are very busy testing and trying to prove to themselves that they have an identity, are acceptable to their peers and hopefully are desirable in relationships. They are therefore very sensitive to issues relating to their ability, their competence and their appearance. They will get defensive and argumentative very quickly if they feel these have been challenged. The flip side of this is that they will also be very responsive to comments that affirm or compliment their fragile identities or integrity as individuals.

This last section is perhaps fairly obvious and in many ways may be overstating a simple point. However, care and respect towards teenagers is a constant theme that runs through what follows next. If this can be held in mind and the focus can be on doing things that build the relationship and the connections, the patterns of communication that result will have a greater chance of being better and more consistently positive.

## **10 RULES OF ENGAGEMENT**

Below are ten aspects of the communication process with your son that will have an impact on his experience and are all in the service of trying to make him talk more.

### **1. Listen**

This is not as simple as it sounds and it makes a big difference. During my training to be a clinical psychologist we had a course called clinical skills and a major part of this was the importance and power of listening. As psychologists our work is all about helping people feel more able to put their thoughts and feelings into words, which is not far removed from what parents are expecting of their sons. This is made much easier if your son feels that you are listening to what they say. The rather cliché things that one associates with psychologists: the head nods, the “uh-huhs” and “uh-hums”, even the hand-to-the-chin move, they all convey to the person that they have our full attention and that we are interested and listening to what they say. If someone feels that they are being listened to they are far more likely to keep talking. An easy way of showing that is through making eye contact, by looking at the person. This does not mean lock them in a focussed death stare because they will most likely look at you and say, “What’s with you today, you are being a freak 😊”. It is about being fully there, not being distracted or doing other things. Try making a concerted effort to listen and be aware of how you can convey that.

### **2. Don’t take the bait**

Prepare and expect to be baited, as discussed above, you will have your buttons pushed, that’s what teenagers do. They do it because it works. They are able to create a diversion from the difficult feelings or situation they were in by getting their parents to into familiar arguments. If parents know that they are going to have the big feeling their sons are so good at eliciting, it is important to have an adult, non-emotional response at hand. This means, keeping calm, acknowledging the reactions your son is having and restating your position.

*I can see you are angry about this but I will come to pick you up at 11pm.*

The reactions and responses will continue and may require that you say it again, remaining calm, rather than being drawn into the arguments that so quickly end conversations. Another adult type response might be:

*When you talk to me like this I get very angry and I think it is better if we discuss it later when we have calmed down and can think more clearly.*

This kind of statement offers many important messages: You the parent are becoming angry; what they are doing is making you angry (giving them feedback about their actions); you believe that reacting out of the anger is not helpful (modelling adult behaviour); and that what is being discussed is important enough to come back to. The intention of not taking the bait is trying to have more conversations that don't spiral into heated shouting matches that close the doors of real communication.

### **3. Apologise**

Unless you and your teenager are truly gifted individuals, at times you will lose your temper at each other and say things that you regret. Always apologise if you are in the wrong. Not an easy thing to do when it feels that you were only partly responsible for the situation. However, it is a good opportunity to model for the teenager what adult behaviour is and it will go a long way to reaffirming the connection you are trying to preserve. This is not an over-the-top self-flagellating drama piece, but rather a message that you recognise your impact on the situation, you are taking responsibility for yourself and behaviours, and that you respect them enough to want to not do it again.

*Remember the conversation we had yesterday, I got really upset and I apologise for saying what I did. It is not true and I was just really frustrated but should not have said that.*

Unfortunately what makes it more difficult is that there is a very large chance that they will not apologise in return. The hope needs to be that they will learn and in the future might do the same, however, the main objective is to keep the channels of communication open.

### **4. Avoid "Always" and "Never"**

Something that it is so easy to slip into when feeling irritated is saying *Always* and *Never*. When we lose our tempers we over state our case.

*You never clean up after yourself; You always say you will but never do; You never do enough work to get good marks; You always leave this place a mess; You never take your dishes to the kitchen; You always leave your stuff lying around!*

Teenagers know that this is unfair and only occasionally true and will just plain resent it. It is also a knock on their integrity and their developing an identity. It is not going to help the cause of getting them to talk more.

It is also asking for a reaction and is an easy hook to divert the conversation away from what it was actually about.

*Please take your plate to the kitchen; we have people coming round this evening. I will do it later. No you will do it now; you always leave your stuff lying around. No I don't. Yes you do, you never take stuff to the kitchen, and I always have to tidy up after you. No you don't, I took stuff through yesterday and besides you always...*

The conversation becomes an argument and moves away from the point which was that there are people coming around and the plate needs to be moved.

Certainly a favourite line I hear in my therapy room from teenagers is:

*My parents keep saying that I always lie and never tell the truth, I know that it is not true. But if that's what they think then why should I be different! If they want me to always lie then fine I will!*

#### **5. Don't always be the winner**

There will be times when you are right and by doing exactly what you said they would or told them not to do they make a mistake. As hard as it is it's better to resist the "I told you so" speech. They left their cell phone in their tog bag and it was stolen. You have told them before not to and it would feel immensely satisfying and vindicating to be able to say so and remind them of that. However, try not because he knows, he knows it was a stupid thing to do and will appreciate the fact that you don't remind him. It is a small thing but it is about balancing out the communications and focusing more on the positives rather than highlighting the negatives.

#### **6. Compromise**

Another good one to think about is the notion of compromise. It can go a long way to encouraging further discussions on both sides. If a teen is forced to always give in to a parent's demands, then talking about their wants or wishes to their parent will quickly start feeling pointless. You and your child are different (they are super quick to remind you of that all the time) and differences of opinion are certain to occur. It therefore makes sense to try and think about allowing these differences to be there and to discuss them without the criticism or belittling of their ideas. Learning to talk through problems will lead to better understanding on both sides. If they feel their side has been adequately listened to and understood, they will be far more likely to compromise on some points. If you can allow yourself to be flexible on some issues to accommodate their views (with those things that are not particularly serious) they will be more likely to give up something to honour their parent's wishes later on.

Another useful point is to use the word we. It conveys a message that you believe that the problem is not all them, that the decisions are not going to be all you and that you have faith that together you can figure stuff out. Instead of saying:

*Well you will just need to compromise my boy!*

Saying something like:

*Ok I hear what you saying and I feel differently about this, is there a way **we** can compromise on this?*

They might even surprise you. ☺

#### **7. Body Language**

Being aware of body language and looking out for how your son is standing, moving, sitting, looking or interacting with the rest of the family can offer a lot of information about what is going on inside of their heads (and hearts). Most teenagers are really good at not telling you what is going on and avoiding talking about anything important in their lives (until it is at a crisis point) however if you are aware of their non-verbal cues it can really help you feel more in the loop. We discussed that they do not want to share things with their parents and in many ways need to keep it to themselves as they try and find solutions on their own. By being alert to their body language and non-verbal cues

you are in a far better position to prevent the big surprises. If they are looking sad or unhappy, seem restless or irritable, sometimes letting them know you notice can feel comforting and perhaps make it easier for them to tell you why.

The other side of this is about being aware of your own body language. It sends a strong message about how open and available you are to having a talk. There were two nurses I worked with in London, both South African and their faces seem to have almost opposite default positions. The one seemed to perpetually frown and had a look which could drop and elephant to his knees and often had her arms folded. The other seemed to have a softer face and smiled a lot and I remember noticing how she seemed to have open hands a lot - like she was about to catch something being tossed to her. They were both effective at what they did and were able to be firm and keep boundaries in a place with some pretty challenging youngsters but I was always struck by how much more co-operative and responsive the young people were towards the open hands rather than the folded arms, the soft smile rather than the frown. It is about thinking about the message your body is sending when talking to your teenager.

### **8. Affirmation**

This next point seems so simple yet can be so hard to do. It is a basic need in all of people to feel affirmed and valued. This is even stronger in children as they are deciding how good they are and if they had value to the world, yet is so often overlooked in teens. There are a whole host of reasons why this is vitally important for teenagers such as: building their self esteem, improve their trust and respect for others and themselves. It is a given that you care about your son, and no-one will argue that. However, it is important to remember that he feels awkward and out of place very easily at this age and is also trying very hard to figure out how much and how little he can do on his own. This means that to be reminded of good and positive things he has done and that you have noticed makes a big difference. Teenagers do not make it easy and as was discussed earlier it is easy to just point out the negatives, but sending the message that you see his efforts, care about him and appreciate the good things he does, paves the way for easier connecting and communicating.

### **9. Don't stop**

Parents often say how immensely frustrating it is not being able to talk or get through to their sons, feeling like anything they say gets ignored or rejected and how they so often feeling like kicking them out or stopping trying altogether. When communication is not going well or is not working it is easy to think it is hopeless and there is no point carrying on. However, the main message that is running through this presentation is that what teenagers need most (and will therefore help them be more able and willing to connect with their parents) is to feel cared about and that their parents want to be a part of their life. When he gives you bat, ignores your apology, doesn't compromise even when you say we, it is the fact that you keep trying that gives the strongest message.

It is important to remember that this is a time when they are going to push you away. They need to. It is a good idea then to give them something to push against. Keep asking,

*Hi my boy, how was your day?*

And if the answer is the usual, *fine*, that is ok because what is most useful and helpful for him is that he knows you always ask. You are there and available should he ever want to say more.

### **10. Be quiet**

The last point is that sometimes you need to just be quiet. The question can go two ways.

*Do you want to tell me about it?*

If the answer is, *No*, it is important to respect that. Even if it takes a huge effort and you find yourself squirming trying to stop yourself from doing so, do your best not to go digging. Unless they want to talk they won't. It is almost impossible and completely unhelpful in this situation to try and force teenagers to talk if they do not want to. You can keep the lines of communication open by saying,

*OK, but I'll be in the kitchen if you need me to listen.*

A powerful message that gives the responsibility back to them: You have noticed that things don't seem so great, you care enough to want to try and help, you respect them enough to give them the choice in how to handle it, and you are available for them should they need you.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it is worth noting how this so often feels like an impossible task for parents: Trying to talk to your sons when they are needing not to talk; Trying to not get mad when they are actively trying to make you mad; Trying to be accepting and caring when all you get in response is disrespect and rejection. This is a reality of this time in their lives, and as we have discussed needs to be like this as they decide who they are and how much they can handle. However, this is in no way saying that you need to allow them to do and say as they please. You are still the parent who makes the rules and sets the example for what is acceptable and not within your family. What is important is that when they are going through the ups and downs, the insecurities and the uncertainties and then reacting out of that, you as parents need to be experienced as less up and down, more stable, and a place of security and something they can rely. How this message gets conveyed is linked very strongly with how you engage and talk to your son, the model you offer him, the respect you show him, and your willingness to stand firm and stay there even when he is shouting:

*I don't care what you think and I don't need you in my life!*

We know that is not true.

### **Useful resources used in this presentation**

1. Anne Cawood – Teenagers need Boundaries
2. David Fong – Surviving Adolescence
3. <http://www.essortment.com/in/Children.Parenting.Discipline/index.htm>
4. <http://parentingteens.about.com/>
5. <http://www.raisingkids.co.uk/>

*This is a general overview challenges facing parents when trying to communicate with their teenagers as presented to the parents of Rondebosch boys in October 2009. It is intended to be used as a resource for parents in thinking about how they interact with their sons and should not be reproduced without permission. For further information contact:*

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