

“Like Pulling Teeth...” Getting Your Teen to Talk

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monosyllabia – a reactive disorder of adolescence characterized by the tendency to speak only in one syllable words

Just kidding. I made up that thing about monosyllabia. But the following story is true.

Fifteen year old Katie walked in the front door of her home and dropped her book bag on the ground. She entered the kitchen where her mom sat doing paperwork, and rummaged for something to eat. Katie glanced over at her mom briefly and forced a quick smile before heading toward the stairway. “How was school?” her mom asked after her. “Good,” Katie replied, and scooted upstairs to her room.

“Good.” “Fine.” “Okay.” The words might be different but the story is still the same: teens fending off the queries of curious (or worried) parents with one-word responses.

Katie and her mom are real clients of mine (their names have been changed). I’m using their story to introduce the topic of how teens and parents talk with one another – or don’t. In fact, here’s what Katie’s mom said when we met for the first time: *“That’s pretty much all I get from her these days. In some ways she’s become a stranger to her dad and me. I miss her. She treats us as if it’s an invasion of her privacy for us to ask how her day at school was.”* Does it sound like something you could find yourself saying about your own teenager? If the answer is yes, read on for ideas about how you can change the way you and your teenager converse.

Most teens rely on friends or close siblings for conversation and stick to the basics when talking with their folks. Others volunteer so little about their lives that the only way their parents learn anything is by asking questions, which their kids then say are annoying. I believe the majority of teenagers really would like to be communicating more with their parents, but I also think that we don’t always make it inviting or easy for them to do it. That’s why I stuck the word “reactive” in my made-up definition of that made-up disorder, monosyllabia. Along with our teenagers, we too are accountable for the scant communications that come our way.

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If we want our adolescents to come to us and talk to us, then we need to change the way we talk to them. And one of the best ways to start is by ditching all those questions we typically assault our kids with when they come home from school, sit down for dinner, or get into the car.

Questions are boring. Questions are predictable. Questions will never jump start a conversation the way you're hoping they will, because they're a one way street.

Try this instead: try telling your teenaged sons and daughters something about yourself they don't already know. Let them get to know you as someone more than "just" their mother or father. Describe experiences you've had that are similar to something they're going through – experiences where you were overwhelmed or lost your confidence or desperately wanted something you couldn't be sure you'd ever get. Share with them your funny habits that you keep hidden from view. Tell them what moves you in this world, or where you still experience whimsy, wonder, and awe. Don't tell them things just to get them talking. Tell them things so they become interested enough in you as a person that they actually want you to know them.

One day Katie and her mom came together for therapy. I listened as Katie's mom described how moved she had been by the kindness of strangers toward an elderly couple she saw that afternoon having trouble navigating a touchpad screen for ordering food. "It took a little while before the couple got it but the people helping them were so patient, and the look on their faces was, like, they were happy to have been the ones there to help! It made me realize how little we have to do to make someone else's life easier, and also a little sad that we don't do it more often." Touched, and a little bit disarmed at her mother's candor, Katie looked her mom and said, "I never knew you thought about stuff like that." Staring down at her hands, Katie's mom responded by nodding vigorously. Then she looked up at us both and smiled. "Yeah, you know it's nice," she replied. "It's nice, your kids seeing you as more than this person who drives them places and threatens to take their cell phone away."

If we want the current dialogue between our teens and ourselves to change, then we may need to lead the way toward something different. We may need to be willing to say, "I'll go first."