

Getting Your Teen to Talk - Part II

by Dr. Janet Sasson Edgette

Actually, it's not about "getting" your teen to talk. That's been part of the problem all along – kids feeling tugged at and interrogated and cajoled into conversations that don't interest them. I stuck that phrase in the title because, if nothing else, it captures the urgency behind so many parents' attempts to learn something more about their adolescent than what time he or she wants to be picked up from the mall.

With kids already on guard against our familiar after-school and dinnertime questions (*How was school? How was your day?*), we're not going to have much luck jump-starting a conversation with yet another question. Besides, questions put it all on them, while we sit back and listen. In some families, listening becomes criticizing or leads to even more questions. No wonder why so many teens do the eat and run thing.

In my prior article, I encouraged parents to try something different. I suggested they learn about who their teenagers are by first letting their teenagers learn about who *they* are. This can happen as a result of parents telling their teenagers, vividly and sincerely, about the things and people and events that affect them and that they think about. No lecture. No points being made. Just a process of becoming more transparent. I call this *Going first*.

Leaving space is another way parents can engender conversation with their adolescents without feeling as if they're dragging it out of them one word at a time. It refers to resisting the urge to pounce on an opportunity to make a point, or otherwise inform, educate, enlighten, or correct. "Every single time I ask my mom a question about sex she gets a panicked look on her face and asks me if I'm thinking about having sex," fifteen year old Kelly, a client of mine, tells me. "So I stopped asking about sex."

That's not good. When I asked Kelly's mom about it, she replied, "Well, I just want to make sure she knows that I think she's too young to be having sex." "Kelly knows you think she's too young to be having sex. You tell her every chance you get," I responded. "Just because she's asking about sex doesn't mean she's about to have it."

In this instance, Kelly's mom had lost the opportunity to take their earlier discussions further. She's one of only a handful of parents whose fifteen-year-olds choose them as their point person for questions about sex. In her urgency to drive home a point, Kelly's mom lost her credibility as someone who would hear her daughter's anxieties over her own.

Continuing to have an influence on our sons and daughters as they get older means we need to use conversation to do it and not lecture. As I told Kelly's mom, "You stand a much better chance of having her listen to you if she doesn't feel she has to be on guard against the points you are trying to make." By the time we parents are starting to really get nervous about our kids' choices, because they are no longer theoretical but very real, most of our kids already know what we think and what we want for them. What they need from us now is something different – an even-tempered sounding board, a witness to their struggle to balance competing needs or desires, perhaps more nuanced information. By squelching your need to make sure your teenager has heard you, and instead *leaving space* in between what your teenager says to you and what you in turn say to him or her, you may discover that place where real conversation begins.