How to Talk to a Brick Wall:
Tearing Down the Barriers between You and Your Teenager

By Jessica and Enrique
Does This Sound Like Your Family?

- **Parents**
  - Yelling and threatening
  - Giving ultimatums
  - Throwing insults
  - Making future plans without considering their child’s feelings

- **Teenagers**
  - Yelling and Crying
  - Lying
  - Sneaking out
  - Running away
  - Abusing drugs
  - Defying authority
  - Making future plans without considering their parents’ feelings

This is a description of Juliet’s family from the play *Romeo and Juliet*...Times haven’t changed much!
“Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what,--get thee to church o’ Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face:
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me;
My fingers itch [to hit you]…”

Lord Capulet to Juliet
*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, scene V
What **Not** To Do If You **Really** Want to Talk to Your Teenagers...

Survey Results from 126 teenagers (58% girls, 42% boys)

Question: What is the number one thing your parents say or do to shut down communication between you?

- Yell or get upset: 33%
- Compare me to siblings: 11%
- Nag about chores: 20%
- Complain about friends: 7%
- Call me names or tease: 9%
- Start crying: 2%
- Embarrass in front of friends: 18%
What *Not* To Do If You *Really* Want to Talk to Your Teenagers...

- Say things that make them “feel bad, disappointed, threatened, stupid or wrong.
  - It breeds low self-esteem, destroys confidence, encourages performance anxiety, causes distrust, results in avoidance of family events.”
- Try to correct, criticize, or change them.
- Argue with them.
- Say, “I know what you mean” or over-sympathize before you have understanding.
What **Not** To Do If You **Really** Want to Talk to Your Teenagers...

- “Push your ideas down your teenagers’ throat.”
  - If you try to impose your ideas on them, they will most likely reject what you have to offer.
  - Trying to mold your teenagers into your own image won’t work. This is the time for them to find out who they are—and it’s not you.

- Nag or complain about a behavior, action, or inaction.

- Do all the talking, diagnose the problem, and give lots of advice.

- Overreact if you hear something you don’t like or that worries you.

- “Interrupt, correct grammar or do two things at once. These are all signals that you aren’t really interested.”


What To Do If You *Really* Want to Talk to Your Teenagers …

- **Ask open-ended questions that help clarify what the person means.**
  - Examples: Do you mean...? Why do you think that happened?
- **Ask their opinion—and want to hear it.**
  - Accept their opinions and what they have to say—it doesn’t mean you agree, but that you *do* value their thoughts.
  - “Avoid conflict over answers. There are no right or wrong answers” when it comes to opinions.
- **Listen in order to understand—not to change the other person.**
- **Show concern for the other person’s feelings.**
What To Do If You *Really* Want to Talk to Your Teenagers …

- Make time for just talking and, most importantly, for listening every day.
  - “Use all the informal opportunities you can to communicate - for example, driving.”
  - Don’t force the time to talk—make sure that it’s a convenient time for your teenager, too.
  - Make it a priority to be available even if it's not a convenient time for you.
- Don’t try to solve problems when you’re just talking to better understand each other’s viewpoints. That can come later.
- Keep your sense of humor, but never tease about a sensitive subject. Learn to laugh about the small stuff.
Listening Tips

- **Be attentive.**
  - Stop other activities.
  - Focus fully, using your eyes as well as your ears.
  - Be sensitive to their tone of voice and expression.

- **Encourage talk.**
  - Smile, if appropriate, or nod to show you understand.
  - Watch your body language.
  - Keep your questions brief, open, and positive.

- **Empathize.**
  - Try to remember what it was like when you were a teen.
  - Focus on underlying feelings that your teen may find difficult to express.

- **Listen with respect.**
  - React to your teenager as you would to an adult friend.
  - Let them vent their grievances.
  - Try not to interrupt or push a topic they don't want to discuss.
Talking Tips

- **Be brief.**
  - Let them do most of the talking.

- **Watch your tone of voice.**
  - Sometimes it isn't what you say -- it's how you say it.

- **Express your feelings.**
  - Reveal some of your inner self.
  - Emphasize your feelings, not your teen's behavior.
  - Don’t overdo it. Expressing your feelings helps to show you’re a real person, but teens are mostly concerned about their feelings.

- **Be honest.**
  - Discuss your ideas, concerns, or thoughts openly and calmly.
Dealing with Problems

- **Use “I” statements.** The classic advice of using “I” statements, instead of critical “you” statements, is still a good one.
  - Specifically describe the **situation** that is causing your problem. Just describe; don't blame. Say, "When you don't call or come home at the time we agreed on . . ."
  - State the **effect** the situation has on you. "... I don't know where you are. . ."
  - Identify the **feeling** that you have. "... and I begin to worry that something might have happened to you."\(^4\)

- **Stay calm.** Yelling doesn't help you make your point.
Dealing with Problems

- **Pick and choose your battles.** Things that deal with your teenagers’ safety are more important than a messy room or what they wear.

- **Love unconditionally.** Don’t give or withhold love based on your teenagers’ behavior.

- **Apologize.** If you have done something to aggravate the situation, be the adult and apologize. Set a good example for your teenagers.

- **Involve your teenagers in decisions that affect them.** The family may not be a democracy, but getting everyone’s input and trying to compromise when possible is important.
Bring on the Show!

So let’s see what Mr. Capulet would do if he had heard all this good advice before he talked with Juliet...

[scene acted out]
When the Drama Begins at Your Home

Three Things for You to Try This Week:

• When you ask “how was your day?” and your teenager actually answers, stop what you’re doing and really listen.

• Consciously decide to not criticize or pick about the small stuff—try it for a full week and see what happens.

• When an argument is brewing, stop and calmly talk—without blame—about the situation involving the problem, the effect the situation has on you, and the feeling that you have—using “I” statements.
The photograph is from Matheson Lang’s production of *Romeo and Juliet* which opened at the Lyceum Theatre, London, on March 14, 1908, and ran through May 30, 1908.

It is a postcard published by Rotary Photo, London. Card No. 7423E. Photograph by the Daily Mirror Studios.

Nora Kerin as Juliet; Herbert Grimwood as Capulet

http://shakespeare.emory.edu/postcarddisplay.cfm?cardid=54

Photograph of a bedroom in the Dolmabahce Palace, Istanbul, Turkey

Photographer: Judi Yost. Used with permission.
References


