

# **My Pre-teen Won't Talk To Me Anymore! ...And She Doesn't Listen To Me Either!**

By Glenda Montgomery  
[www.positiveparentingpdx.com](http://www.positiveparentingpdx.com)

Sound familiar? I hear this fairly regularly from clients and remember feeling it myself as my daughter entered middle school. What was, through elementary school, an open relationship with lots of fun back and forth conversations began to turn to a wary, hesitant rather stilted relationship. I couldn't figure out why my daughter was no longer openly sharing and seemed not to hear what I had to say when I tried to talk.

At first, I put it down to hormones...hers of course. Her moodiness and new closed lip-ness must be because of that. So, being what I hoped was a "good parent" I just made a point of accepting that this would be the "new normal". But one afternoon when I was trying to talk to her, Mikaila blurted out, "You NEVER LISTEN TO ME!" I was shocked. I was open to listening to her...I wanted her to talk more. What did she MEAN I didn't listen to her?! I had some thinking to do.

When I really thought about it, I had to admit to a few (kind of embarrassing) things. First, I realized that sure, I was hoping to hear her opinions about things BUT, I always made a point of saying what I thought or felt FIRST before she talked. Deep down, I guess I was hoping to give her some "acceptable guidelines" to use to form HER opinions. I also had to admit to a little fear about the things that were now in the air to talk about...middle school was a whole new world and I began to think that I needed to use any controversial or difficult topic that may present itself as a "teachable moment". I also believe that I was taking a lot of what my daughter did say personally, and would counter anything she said that was critical with some self defense rather than really hearing her...which broke down conversation really quickly. I take pride in being a problem solver and when I looked back at the attempts Mikaila made to bring up a problem, I know that in trying to be helpful, I was sending the message to her that she was clearly not able to handle the situation herself because I tended to leap in with all sorts of ideas for her to use to begin to tackle what confronted her, rather than asking her what she planned to do. I began to recognize that the way I was trying to talk to my daughter had a lot to do with why she WASN'T talking...or listening, either!

Teenagers' number one complaint is that adults don't listen to them. And, the fact is, teens and pre-teens do not HEAR US until they FEEL HEARD. It is only when they are confident that we have gotten THEIR message that they can let it go and hear OUR message. Most of us WANT to hear our kids but we get tripped up, like I did, and neither truly hear nor are heard. So, what can we do to keep communication flowing with our teens and pre-teens? How to start?.....

What worked for me was going back to a template that I had used when my kids were preschoolers. It had worked well then, to allow my little ones to know that I understood what they were feeling and allowed them to become more in control of their emotions. Now, I could use the same template to allow my daughter to feel heard:

"So, you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and you wish \_\_\_\_\_?" Guess what your child is feeling and why. Guess at his or her wish. You may be right. You may be wrong, but your child will think about it and will fine-tune your answers so that they more accurately reflect how they DO feel and what they DO wish. The difficult thing about this is that you need to say the wish EVEN IF YOU DON'T AGREE WITH

IT. Just saying it does not mean you agree...It means you HEAR and UNDERSTAND that is your child's wish. What follows is conscious SILENCE.

As Jane Nelsen says in chapter seven of "Positive Discipline for Teenagers", 'If you re-arrange the letters of "listen" you will get "silent".' We adults have a hard time holding silence. But, in order to hold space for your child to talk, you need to assure them that you hear them and then continue by holding back your own words and waiting...in silence. It takes practice. BUT, WOW, what an immediate difference this made to conversations with my girl. It was night and day. When I was able to use the template "You feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and you wish \_\_\_\_\_" to guess what she was feeling and wishing, and then REMAIN SILENT, my daughter suddenly began to offer what she felt and thought, first either correcting or agreeing with my guesses and then moving on (because I WASN'T talking) to continue to explain her point of view and conflicting feelings. I was amazed and impressed ...and grateful to again feel a part of her inner world where I had so recently felt locked out. Wow.

When I referred back to chapter seven in "Positive Discipline for Teenagers", I found Jane Nelsen had listed common barriers to us really listening to our kids. I saw I wasn't alone. My own traps were included in her list!

#### **Barriers to Listening:**

1. Stepping in to fix or rescue so you can be a "good parent", rather than listening as your teens try to figure things out for themselves.
2. Trying to talk teens out of their feelings or perceptions so they have a the "right" perceptions and feelings.
3. Giving defensive explanations about your point of view.
4. Interrupting to teach lessons on morality or values.
5. Taking what teens say personally. And letting your own unresolved issues get in the way.
6. Using what your teens say against them to punish, criticize, all names, and lecture.

Jane Nelsen followed up by offering some more tips to hearing and being heard by your child that you might find useful:

1. You need to be sincerely interested in learning about the world of your teen or preteen.
2. Effective listening requires wide open body language to indicate your interest. (Stop what you are doing to listen)
3. Have respect for you separate realities. Recognize that there are more than one way to see things (and one is not necessarily better than another)
4. Show empathy. ("I understand how you might feel that way or I remember feeling that way before")
5. Be sincerely curious about their point of view, rather than just waiting to be able to overlay your point of view. ("What else?" "Tell me more" "Did anything else bother you?")

Entering the years of parenting a teen is a scary time. It is scarier still when you feel locked out of your child's world. Having teens who trust you and remain open to you, open to sharing thoughts and feelings with you is key to them safely and successfully getting through these years. When you practice effective, deep and empathetic listening, you will notice your teen or preteen begin to talk more AND that they are much more open to hearing YOU. Remember that in order to hear you they must FIRST FEEL HEARD. That means that your ideas need to take a back seat until your child's message is received in full! When you practice this kind of listening, you are making life more pleasant in the moment AND you are also modeling for your child effective life skills that they will be able to use in their future.