



PARENTING POSTS

A newsletter for parents of sixth grade students

Listening + Responding = Communication

Do you speak *at* your child or *with* your child? Can you carry on an easy conversation with your child and your child's friends? How are those conversations different with adults you know?

Typically, adults have had a lot of practice anticipating and answering questions such as "How are you?" or "How's the family?" But sixth graders have had a lot less experience with personal communication. Avoid asking personal questions that puts them on the spot. Be courteous and friendly.

Build communication with preteens by addressing topics of potential interest to them. For example, "So, do you follow any sports teams?" or "What did you do for fun this summer?" Allow preteens to ask questions of you as well. Such light conversations help youth learn patterns of communication and build connections. Personal communication will improve as conversation becomes easier and trust increases.

Listen to Others

Students often report, "My friends listen to what I say, but my parents only hear me talk. They don't get it!" Some kids simply feel their parents don't really listen to them.

Parents also feel frustrated when their children don't seem to listen to them. With so many digital devices to capture our attention, learning to shut off the distractions and really listen to one another is more important than ever. You are setting the groundwork for positive communication during the teen years. Learning to listen is the key to good communication and conversation.

The key to helping children is modeling good communication skills. Start by listening to your child so they feel heard. Ask for clarification, and refrain



Reading all of the child's verbal and nonverbal cues will help you really "hear" what message is being sent.



Stress Less Activity

Stress is part of everyone's life. Even young children! Try this activity with your child to help reduce stress and enjoy time together.

Try some calming yoga stretches together before you have the next important conversation. Does stretching help you relax?

from jumping in and solving their problems. Instead, listen closely and determine what kind of help they really need. Sometimes just listening and being heard is all a person really wants and needs.

Really listening means listening without criticizing or judging what is said. Children may tell you only what is safe to say when they feel many of their ideas will be met with negativity. Criticism and judgment stall and frustrate conversations. Conversely, when you listen with total attention, you are showing that the child's concerns and interests are important to you. Listening with complete attention is referred to as active listening.

Active listening involves observing the other person's body language, facial expressions, tone of voice and other gestures. Reading all of the child's verbal and nonverbal cues will help you really "hear" what message they are trying to send. Active listening is especially important when strong emotions are being felt or expressed. Your response should show that you understood what was conveyed and should leave the door open for further discussion. For example, your preteen might say, "Leave me alone. You don't care what happens to me." An unhelpful response would be, "Don't be ridiculous. Of course, I do!" A more productive comment might be, "You sound as if you feel hurt and angry." The first response ends the conversation while the second one shows active listening and understanding.

Adults should try to avoid other conversation enders when communicating with preteens. Some statements almost guarantee an end to communication. They include:

- "You don't really mean that!"
- "You shouldn't feel that way."
- "Don't argue with me!"
- "Don't talk back to me!"
- "That's nonsense."

Your child feels the same way you do when receiving those types of messages: confused and frustrated with the difficulty of communicating.

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Listen To Yourself

Sometimes parents need to listen to themselves and understand how they are really communicating with a child. Are you patient? Are you really hearing what your child wants to say?

- **Listening to others is easier than listening to yourself.** If you are constantly being misunderstood, consider the way you have been sending your messages or responding to others.
- **Listen to how you respond to differences of opinion.** Do you really accept individual differences? Do you share your true feelings or do you withhold them? Are you tolerant of views you disagree with or do you become angry or sarcastic?
- **Listen to your tone of voice when you talk to your spouse, your children and your friends.** Does it change? Voice tone and inflection communicates more to the listener than just words alone.
- **Communication is not done with words but with people.** Consider recording yourself to better hear how your message is coming across to others.
- **Texts, emails, social media posts and voicemails are not for "real conversations."** To have a meaningful conversation, one must be in the same room, fully paying attention to the other person.



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