



## Inside Your Teen's Brain: 7 Things Your Teenager Really Wants You to Know

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“Have you ever wondered what’s going on inside your teenager’s head?” What was she *thinking* when she made that choice? Why won’t he *listen* to what I’m telling him? It can seem as if an adolescent is completely wrapped up in a separate world, feet planted firmly in the air instead of on the ground. As parents, we often come away bewildered or frustrated when our teen’s perspective seems so utterly different from our own.

*Parenthood is an ongoing lesson in learning to fearlessly let go of trying to control someone you would give your life to protect.*

It's normal to feel like communication is difficult during your child's adolescence. Your teen may not have mastered the art of communicating his thoughts and feelings yet, and sometimes you may feel like you have to "guess" at what he's experiencing. This is especially true if a teen is oppositional or defiant (or has full blown [ODD](#)), arguing and fighting against your efforts to support him. Listening to a teenager without trying to fix or change what he's thinking can be difficult - after all, as parents we guide and teach. But sometimes all they really need us to do is listen and hear what they're trying to say. A word of caution: the opinion of one (or some) teens is not necessarily the opinion of all! Each child is unique.

We asked a sample of teens the following question: "If you could tell parents one thing – just one thing – and know that they would listen and truly understand, what you say?"

**“Stop trying to fix things for me.”** Adolescence is a time full of changes: physical, mental and emotional. When we see our kids struggling, it’s tempting to jump in and offer solutions, even if they are well-

intended, but too much focus on what is “wrong” can leave him feeling as if there is something wrong with *him*. Before stepping in with suggestions on how your teen can do things differently, ask yourself: "Is this something I truly need to fix for my child? Is it a "Big" thing or a "Minor" thing? Is it a legal or safety issue?" If not, instead of jumping in to fix things, offer a comment of support: "I'm sorry you're going through that right now. Is there anything I can do to help or support you?" Grab every opportunity to communicate to your teen that you have confidence in him and his ability to manage his life, and that you're always there if he needs you. Ask yourself, "Am I trying to do something for my teen that he can do for himself?"

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***“Think back to what it was like when you were a teenager. How did you feel?”*** If someone offered you ten thousand dollars to go back and relive your adolescence, would you? Most of us wouldn't! Think back for a moment about what it was like: conflict with parents (which is supposed to be “normal” but still hurts); peer pressure; romantic breakups and falling out with friends; homework; being told what to do by every adult in your life; acne, social awkwardness. The further we get from adolescence, the less we remember the intense emotions with which we ourselves also struggled at times (or for some of us, most of the time). Your teen has the same type of struggles – maybe more, maybe less. If you find yourself having trouble empathizing with your teen, send yourself back in time to a struggle you had. How could someone have responded that might have helped or supported you?

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***“I make a lot of mistakes. And I take the [consequences](#) that I get. After I do the consequences, the lectures need to stop. Trust me that I learned. And if I didn't...you'll get your chance to punish me again.”*** This teen's comment says it all. No one likes being reminded over and over again of their past mistakes. So when the issue is over, let it be over. Don't keep dragging up past mistakes. And if another incident happens again, give the consequences you originally laid out. As James Lehman says, "Act as if you are the CEO of your family. Stay objective." A good CEO doesn't bring his or her workers into their office and remind them of all their past mistakes if they want to see good results.

***“Sometimes coping skills **don't** work for me.”*** What this teen is really saying is, “Even when I use the coping skills I've learned, I still feel awful.” And that can be true. When your teen feels like “nothing works” and is ready to give up, that's the time she needs your encouragement and support the most. Unfortunately, hopelessness can also look like anger or irritation, which can push our buttons as parents. When your teen is struggling and seems to be taking it out on you (or her brother, or the family dog), step back before getting drawn into an argument over how she's handling things. She may need your support in using those coping skills she's learned. A particularly stressful situation may be taxing the skills she knows, and she may just need some time, space and encouragement to use what she's learned. Coping with stress and difficult situations is hard stuff. It's a learning process that goes on our whole lives. Let's face it, we never reach a point (even in adulthood) where we say, “Wow, I cope with everything wonderfully, all the time!”

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***“I'm as good as my brother; I'm just better at different things.”*** It's easy to fall into the trap of comparing our kids. “Why can't you be more like your sister? She always turns in her homework and

she's getting all A's!" (Remember Jan from the Brady Bunch? It was always "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!") But everyone has different talents, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses. If you were constantly compared to a co-worker at your job, you would likely come away angry and frustrated, too. It would also tear down that relationship as you came to resent the co-worker who was held up as better than you. Resist the urge when you're tempted to use a sibling as an example of the behavior you'd like to see in your teen.

***"Can't it just be about me sometimes? And can't that just be okay?"*** Yes, adolescents typically appear to be wrapped up in themselves, sometimes to the point that they don't seem to think of others. While we want to help our kids learn empathy and step outside of their own experience to understand how their behavior impacts others, there are times when they just need to know we understand. A hug, a pat on the shoulder or a simple, *"I'm sorry you had a hard day,"* can go a long way.

***"Stop trying to control me."*** Parenthood is an ongoing lesson in learning to fearlessly let go of trying to control someone you would give your life to protect. Watching someone you love make choices you believe are wrong is one of the hardest things to go through in life. It can leave you feeling helpless and afraid. But in reality, you *don't* control your teen. In fact, you haven't controlled your child from the moment he was born. (If you could, there would be no crying, no waking up in the middle of the night, and no tantrums in the middle of Target.) You can comfort, soothe, encourage, give consequences, love, support, offer suggestions and guidance. But ultimately, your child will make his own choices. This is his show. The more he feels you are trying to be a supporting cast member in his life, rather than his director, the more likely he will be to listen to your ideas and input.

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Even though we've worked with thousands of adolescents over the years, it's always interesting to hear what teens would say if they could choose just one thing that they wish adults would truly listen to and understand. You may decide, in a calm or quiet moment, to ask your teen the same question. If you do, be prepared for the answer and try to truly listen and do your best to understand their point of view – it may surprise you.

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