

THEIR VOICE



FOR TEENAGERS

*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also, to the interests of others.
—Philippians 2:4*

In what ways are you allowing your kids to develop their voice through expressing their opinions, desires, passions, and thoughts? Do you plan intentional time to listen? Carefully with no agenda? Are you listening to connect or to affirm?

“Listening to connect” versus “listening to affirm” are two different types of listening. **“Listening to affirm” is reiterating what someone has said to you. Whereas “listening to connect” is heading into a conversation neutral, without having made up in your mind beforehand how you are going to respond.** It also means not having a ready-made story about what you think happened or did not happen and the answer to go along with it. That is not “listening to connect.” That is “listening to respond.”

But what if you entered the conversation and just listened? What if you asked questions for which you had no answers and you made no assumptions? How would that feel for you? How do you think it would feel for them?

If we don’t “listen to connect,” we could end up manipulating, dictating, or controlling the outcome of the conversation. Expressing your hopes and dreams to your children is one thing. Telling them what to do or how to think is quite another. Trying to control the outcome of their choices might fit better into your plans, but not necessarily God’s.

It is important to affirm the voice of your kids as they grow. It doesn’t mean you agree with everything they say. I certainly don’t agree with my children on all points. But I often ask myself, do they feel like they’ve been heard? When you ask yourself the same question, you can answer authentically after you’ve listened without an agenda, without judgment, and without assumption. When you listen closely for a glimpse into the heart of your child and listen beyond the behavior, the possibility for connection opens up.

There’s another important question you will want to ask yourself. **Are you hearing what your kids are saying, or are you dismissing their ideas or thoughts because of fear?**

Fear is a powerful emotion that can take you in a direction you don’t want to go. Are you making up movies in your mind about what you think is going on? We do this as parents, not always consciously, but it happens. I’ve done it, and I am not proud of it. Pay attention to how you are listening and responding. **Be aware of your quick answers, your body language, your facial expressions, your eyes, your words, and your tone.**

Consider what is going on inside of you while your child is sharing their opinions or thoughts on an important matter. Sometimes it is not what we say that gets us in trouble, but our body language and facial expressions. Kids can sense your fear, disapproval, and attitude, even if you say nothing. Trying to control the outcome of their choices might fit better into your plans, but not necessarily God’s.

Both my daughter and son pick up on facial reactions immediately. I can't get away with anything. Had I paid closer attention to a few of these nonverbal cues earlier in my parenting, the outcome of my conversations might have been more influential. **The goal is to keep the lines of communication continually open, which is only possible through humility, a tender heart, and guidance by the Holy Spirit.**

When my daughter was fifteen, she went through a rough patch. We hit a wall that neither my husband nor I knew how to climb over, and we did not know how to help her. The pain we experienced was hard for all three of us, but more so for my daughter.

We sought the counsel of good friends. We prayed, we cried, and we went to family counseling. She went to counseling, and we did everything we knew to support her and help her overcome the wall she faced. In the long run, there was much sweetness that came out of the bitter. We learned through practicing, failing, and trying again to hear and be heard. John Maxwell says, **"Being heard is like being loved."**

As the Lord burned away the old patterns and behaviors in our relationship, a new season emerged between my daughter and me. It was not always easy, but we were worth it. The growth and maturity from that season laid the groundwork for my husband and I to allow her to eventually move to New York City to chase her dreams.

Often in our lives, there is a pruning process that brings about new life, like a necessary ending allowing for a new beginning. As we journeyed through this new season, our hearts were bonded together in a fresh way, stronger and different than in the past. **Simple and intentional actions built trust, and that was worth every pain we ever faced.** Our daughter's voice was heard, and she felt loved. Give your child the same gift.

What a difference truly hearing can make in your relationship with your kids, but also with everyone in your life. **Giving people a voice sets them on the right path in relationships and helps them solidify their identity as they express who they are and what they believe.** In return, you will gain understanding and insight, which will support the relationship moving forward. This creates what most of us want—an essence of peace and harmony, especially with those we love.

Smart Reflection

How willing are you to be honest about how well you listen? What changes are you willing to make for the life of the relationship? Will you have the courage to ask for forgiveness if you haven't listened well?

Meditate on Proverbs 15:28, *"Good people think before they answer. Evil people have a quick reply, but it causes trouble"* (GNT).

A New Possibility

Think of hearing these words: *"Thanks, Mom/Dad. I appreciate you taking the time to really listen and not jump in to give me advice."* What would those words mean to your child?

Lord, I pray my heart and mind would be sensitive to Your leading and Your love as I mentor my child through these transitional years. I'm asking for Your mercy and grace so that my child would know You more intimately because of it. Help me pay attention to the nonverbal cues in both me and my child. And let Your loving grace cover over and season my words always, in both this time and the season to come.

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