



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

POSITIVE SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

"We open doors so others can walk through them."

—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

OVERVIEW

Parents and caregivers practice eight simple behavioral adaptations to create a warm, non-judgmental space for teens to talk about challenges.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help your teen feel comfortable sharing their struggles with you
- When your teen is trying to communicate with you about something difficult
- To foster greater closeness with your teen

TIME REQUIRED

- 5 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Parents/Caregivers will:

- Practice non-judgment
- Create a warm space in which teens can feel safe opening up
- Practice empathy

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)

- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Empathy
- Kindness
- Love

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- For parents/caregivers: Take a moment to think about when you were a teen. Was there ever a moment when you were struggling to find the courage to say something to your parent(s) or caregiver(s)? When you finally got the courage, how did the conversation go? What made it go well or poorly?
- In general, what are some things that others do to help you feel comfortable disclosing challenging things/struggles you are facing?

INSTRUCTIONS

As teens move toward becoming more independent from their parents/caregivers, they tend to be less inclined to share personal hardships, like feeling hurt by their friends, struggling with their classes, or doing something wrong. When they do share, it can be a valuable opportunity to show them your love and desire to understand them.

When teens make a bid to talk to you about their challenges, respond by letting them know that you're available for them. You can show that you're really listening—with warmth and non-judgment—by following these eight tips:

1. Make eye contact with your teen as much as possible, while still appearing natural.
2. Lean forward and have responsive body language toward your teen.
3. Sit straight and remain engaged while your teen is talking to you.
4. Keep your full attention on your teen.
5. Nod your head in response to what your teen says to you.
6. Speak slowly and softly.
7. Show empathy through your gestures and body language.
8. Be as natural as possible with your teen.

When your teen is vulnerable with you, it helps to acknowledge the courage it took to do so, by saying things like, "Thank you for being so honest. That must have been hard for you to say. Do you want to tell me more?"

As you're listening attentively, you may sometimes hear teens talk about their regrets. For example, a teen might realize that they acted without thinking things through or they didn't know how to stand up for themselves and felt trapped. You can show them empathy by saying things like, "Ahh. What an intense feeling to have."

With non-judgmental listening, teens can feel open to figuring out their own solutions and may make plans about how they might handle a similar situation in the future. You can acknowledge your teen's initiative and reflection by saying things like, "That's a big decision. I'm glad to hear it. Thank you for sharing this with me."

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did you notice any change in how your interaction went compared to past interactions in which your teen tried to communicate with you?
- Have you noticed an improvement in your relationship with your teen?
- Have you noticed any changes in the way in which your teen communicates with you?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a [study](#), teens between 13 and 16 years old were randomly assigned to watch video interactions between a teen describing feeling rejected or doing something wrong and their parents listening either well (with empathy and non-judgment) or not (with apathy and judgment). The study found that teens anticipated feeling greater well-being when imagining self-disclosing to a parent who listened with empathy and non-judgment compared to a parent who listened with apathy and judgment.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Communicating with our teens can be challenging. When we express severe disappointment or lecture teens, this can lead them to [feel inhibited](#) about disclosing to us in the future because they are worried about a negative reaction.

On the other hand, listening to your teen with empathy and non-judgment can help nurture a sense of intimacy between you and a willingness to disclose to you again. When teens feel heard, they feel your support and validation, which can foster their well-being and improve your relationship.

SOURCE

Soenens, B., Vansteenkiste, M., Luyckx, K., & Goossens, L. (2006). [Parenting and adolescent problem behavior: An integrated model with adolescent self-disclosure and perceived parental knowledge as intervening variables.](#) *Developmental Psychology*, 42(2), 305–318.

Weinstein, N., Huo, A., & Itzchakov, G. (2021). [Parental listening when adolescents self-disclose: A preregistered experimental study.](#) *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 209, 105178.