



TAKE-HOME SKILL: LISTENING TO YOUR TEEN WITH COMPASSION

"Learning is a result of listening, which in turn leads to even better listening and attentiveness to the other person. In other words, to learn from the child, we must have empathy, and empathy grows as we learn."

—Alice Miller

OVERVIEW

Strategies to help parents/caregivers and teens develop compassionate listening skills and strengthen caregiver-teen relationships.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

You can use the strategies in this lesson whenever you are engaging with your teen. Think of a time when you will be together and when distractions will be minimal.

- At mealtime
- On a walk or a drive
- Before bed

TIME REQUIRED

- Variable (15 minutes to 1 hour)

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School

MATERIALS

- None

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Parents/caregivers will:

- Share with their teen five approaches to listening deeply
- Model using the five approaches to listening deeply

Teens will:

- Discuss explore and try the five approaches to listening deeply

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

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

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Perspective Taking
- Kindness
- Connection

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relational Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-judgment
- Open awareness

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Often we listen to others without really hearing them. This can result in missing out on opportunities to really connect with another person and can even make others feel neglected, disrespected, and resentful. As a parent/caregiver, you can strengthen your ability to listen deeply, which can increase your bond with your teen. What's more, you can help your teen strengthen their ability to listen deeply, which can increase their bonds with peers and others in their community. And when we have stronger bonds, we can bridge differences more easily, feel a greater sense of connection, and experience greater health and well-being.

- Take a moment to reflect on times from your own life when you have felt someone was really listening to you or imagine what it might feel like to be listened to with compassion. What did the person you were talking to do to make you feel heard and understood?
- Reflect on your teenage years. Do you remember feeling heard? When and with whom? Did you wish adults listened differently? If so, how?
- Often, when we feel we are truly heard, the listener has used five approaches.
 1. They **affirm** our feelings and opinions...even if they don't share them. For example, "It sounds like you're feeling sad."
 2. They are **curious** about our feelings and opinions...even if they don't share them. For example, "Please tell me more about..."
 3. They express **empathy** about the feelings we share...even if they don't share them. For example, "I can see you're upset."
 4. They use **engaged body language**. For example, they face you, make eye contact, and aren't distracted or looking at their phones. *Note: Not all cultures believe eye contact is appropriate.*
 5. They listen to understand you and **avoid making judgements or giving advice**. For example, "That sounds like it would be frustrating."
- Note that these approaches, and what compassionate listening looks like and sounds like, may vary based on people's backgrounds and cultures. Reflect on what listening with compassion consists of within your own culture.

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Engage with your teen:

Plan for a time when you and your teen will have some uninterrupted time together. This could be at a meal, on a walk, or during some other time you plan to spend together.

Based on your conversation prior to this activity, consider starting with neutral topics, such as asking how your child's day was, sharing about your day, or asking a question that will be engaging for your child (i.e., about their favorite TV show, sports team, or a friend).

Next, ask your teen to reflect on what makes them feel really heard (for example, with friends or when they are talking to an adult) and use the five approaches to understand their responses.

Consider also asking what listening looks like in your family (parent/caregiver to child, child to parent/caregiver, sibling to sibling, grandmother to grandchild, etc.)?

Then share with them the five approaches you have been learning about:

- 1) Affirm their feelings
- 2) Engage your curiosity
- 3) Express empathy

- 4) Use engaged body language
- 5) Avoid judgment or giving advice

Ask your teen if they have ever used any of these five approaches.

- Which ones feel like they would be easy and which ones feel like they might be more difficult?
- In what situations and with whom do you think these approaches would be helpful to use? (With friends? Teachers? Siblings?)

** Remember to use and model the five approaches as they share with you.*

If it will be engaging for your teen, consider practicing compassionate skills for five minutes. Ask your child to pick a topic of their interest, then ask them to talk about this topic for one-two minutes while you practice the five listening skills. Reflect back to your teen what you heard. Next, switch roles with your teen.

CLOSURE

Let your teen know that you plan to try and use these approaches when they have issues or concerns they would like to share with you, and let them know they can remind you to use these approaches if you forget. We all forget sometimes and it is common for parents/caregivers to jump to solve their teens problems rather than to listen with compassion as teens understand and make meaning of their thoughts.

**Avoiding judgment and refraining from giving advice, unless asked to, can help your teen develop problem-solving skills of their own, can communicate that you trust them, and can deepen your relationship.*

Invite your teen to experiment with these five approaches over the next week and let them know you will do the same. If possible, practice them together the next time you are with other family members, friends, or at a community event.

At the end of the week, come together again and listen with compassion as you both share your experiences and observations.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Reflect on the conversation and if there are any areas you want to dig into deeper or revisit with your teen.
- What parts seemed to resonate most with your teen?
- Were there any moments that felt harder for you than others? Why do you think that was?
- What strategies or tools can you use throughout the week to help you remember to use and model the five approaches to compassionate listening?
- Try to notice when others are listening with compassion to you and note how it makes you feel.

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/caregivers 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/caregiver who listened with empathy and non-judgment compared to a parent/caregiver 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

[Making Caring Common](#)