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Why Your Grumpy Teenager Doesn't Want to Talk to You

Adolescence

By LISA DAMOUR NOV. 15, 2017

Most parents have seen their teenager start the day in a reasonably good mood, but then return from school draped in gloom and chilly silence. As hard as it can be to support our children when they tell us what's wrong, it's that much harder to help the obviously upset adolescent who turns down a warm invitation to talk.

These interactions usually unfold in an awkward and predictable sequence. We earnestly ask, "Is everything O.K.?" and our teenager responds with a full stop "No," an insincere "Yeah," or freezes us out while fielding a flurry of texts. We then tend to nurse a sense of injury that our teenager has rebuffed our loving support.

But when adolescents hold their cards close to their chests, they often have a good reason. To better ease our own minds and be more useful to our teenagers we can consider some of the ordinary, if often overlooked, explanations for their reticence.

They Worry We'll Have the Wrong Reaction

Our children often know us better than we know ourselves, having spent their young lives learning our reflexive responses. When a teenager feels lousy about bombing a test but knows that you are likely to tell her that she should have studied more, she won't be eager to talk.

If you suspect this might be a barrier and can listen without getting defensive, just ask, “Are you worried that I’ll have a bad reaction?” You might start a valuable conversation — even if it’s not the one you were looking for — while paving the way to better talks down the line. And we should probably think twice about the long-term implications of saying “I told you so” to our teenagers (even when we did tell them so).

They Anticipate Negative Repercussions

Parents focused on the narrow question of what went wrong can forget that our adolescents, who have more information than we do, are probably thinking about a bigger picture. Impassive silence can hide a teenager’s whirring deliberations: “Will Dad limit my driving privileges if I tell him that I put a ding in the car?” or “If I explain that Nikki had a pregnancy scare, will Mom be weird about it when I want to hang out with her next weekend?”

We can’t always keep ourselves from feeling judgmental about teenagers. And, to be sure, there are adolescents (and adults) who get stuck in worrisome ruts. But as a psychologist, there are two rules I live by: good kids do dumb things, and I never have the whole story.

Recognizing that teenagers (and, again, adults) screw up from time to time can improve communication. On the days when they do feel like sharing, we can alert adolescents to our compassionate and forgiving stance by saying, “I know you’re bummed about the car. How do you want to make this right?” or “That must have been really scary for Nikki. Is she doing O.K.?”

They Know That Parents Sometimes Blab

Teenagers are often justly concerned that we might repeat what they tell us. Sometimes we only realize in retrospect that news we divulged to others felt top-secret to our teenager. And sometimes they tell us critical information — such as word of a suicidal classmate — that must be passed along.

Whether you owe your teenager an apology for past indiscretions or are trying to get ahead of the issue, I think it’s fair and kind to promise adolescents a very high degree of confidentiality at home. Our teenagers deserve to have a place where they can process, or at least dump, delicate details about themselves or the scores of other kids with whom they must find a way to coexist.

Parents, like therapists, can lay out the limits of what we can keep private. Adolescents are usually sensible; they expect adults to act on news that they or a peer might be in immediate danger. But we can help teenagers speak more freely by making it clear that, barring a crisis, we will keep their secrets and offer moral support as they and their friends weather typical adolescent storms, such as painful breakups. And when our teenagers do share critical information about their peers, we can include them in the process of deciding how to pass along what they've told us.

Talking Doesn't Feel Like the Solution

A wise teenager in my practice once said to me, "You know, I'm 90 percent of the way over what happened at school by the time I get home. Rehashing it all for my mom isn't going to help me get past it."

Even when we don't know the source of our child's turmoil, we should operate from the assumption that our teenager will soon feel better. Of course there are real grounds for concern when adolescents are miserable day after day and cannot bounce back from their emotional downturns. But most of the time psychological well-being is like physical well-being: Healthy people fall ill, but they recover.

We don't take our adolescents' viruses personally and we probably shouldn't take their grumpy moods personally, either. Happily, the support we offer the flu-stricken also works when teenagers come down with grouchy silence. Without delving into what's wrong, we can ask if there's anything we can do to help them feel better. Would they like our quiet company or prefer some time alone? Is there a comfort food we can offer or is there something they want to watch on TV?

There's more value in providing tender, generic support than we might imagine. It is difficult for teenagers to maintain perspective all the time. The speed of adolescent development sometimes makes teenagers lose their emotional footing and worry that they will never feel right again. We send our teenagers a powerful, reassuring message when we accept and are not alarmed by their inscrutable unease: I can bear your distress, and you can, too.

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