



Quiz:

Talking and Active Listening With Your Teen

Active listening can clue you in to what's really bugging him.

The next time your teen flies off the handle, try using "active listening" to get past the emotions and on to what's really bugging him. It works like this: You listen without interrupting (no matter what), then sum up what you heard for him to confirm. In the end, you get clear on his problem and he feels understood.¹

Once he's had his say, you might start with:

- It seems like you're feeling...
- I hear you say you're feeling...
- I wonder if you're feeling...
- Am I right that you're feeling...

Then describe the emotions you saw:

- It sounds to me like you're feeling hurt and angry. Is that true?
- I hear you saying that you're overwhelmed. Am I right?

Or, use a figure of speech if that works better:

- It seems like you're at end of your rope. Is that right?
- Are you feeling like that situation is out of control?

Don't worry about whether you're right or wrong — his response will guide you. That's how the connection begins.

Check out active listening and “I” statements in action.

Get some practice here first, then try it with your teen.

Read each scenario and choose the answer you are most likely to respond with during the given situation. Count up your score and find out what it says about your responses and active listening skills.

¹ Sandra Boston de Silvia. *Aiming Your Mind: Strategies and Skills for Conscious Communication*, 47

- 1. Your teen bursts into tears and confesses she had a huge fight with her best friend. What would you say?**
 - A. "You sound very sad about that, honey."
 - B. "Well, honey, I'm sure it wasn't your fault."
 - C. "That's no big surprise. She's such a snob. How could you stand her?"

- 2. Your teen promises to take out the garbage after school, but he doesn't. His excuse? "I had baseball practice after school, then I did a ton of homework. Now I'm just too tired." What would you say?**
 - A. "I'm disappointed that you broke your promise. I need to be able to count on you. How can we make this work for both of us?"
 - B. "Sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed with all those commitments. I've got a few ideas about how we can fix that."
 - C. "So? I've been at work all day, and now I have to cook dinner for you. What if I said, 'Sorry, but I'm just too tired?'"

- 3. Your teen daughter is leaving for school when you notice she's wearing a low cut shirt under her jacket. You mention it to her and she explodes, saying, "If you won't let me wear this, why did you let me buy it?" How would you respond?**
 - A. "I feel like that shirt isn't really appropriate for school. I need you to put a tee shirt on under it, or wait and wear it after school."
 - B. "I'm worried that shirt won't fly with the school's dress code. Go and pick something else."
 - C. "You're not wearing that shirt to school! You look like a tramp! Go change!"

- 4. Your teen complains that he has to share the family car with his siblings, saying that it's unfair. How would you respond?**
 - A. "I hear that you're frustrated. Wouldn't it be great if we could afford cars for you guys so no one had to share?"
 - B. "I realize it seems unfair, but we only have one car. We really don't have another choice."
 - C. "I own the car. I pay the insurance. I make the rules."

- 5. Your teen wants to go to a concert with a boy you don't know. You ask the boy's name, how old he is, and where he lives. She accuses you of snooping into her personal life. What would your response be?**
 - A. "I feel nervous about letting you go off with someone I don't know. I need to meet him first."
 - B. "Sweetie, if I don't look out for you, who will?"
 - C. "No way! I don't know him, and the last two guys you brought home were punks."

- 6. Your teen gets furious when you make an innocent comment about the neighbor's trendy new car. He yells, "You are such an idiot! And your car is a piece of crap!" and then storms away. How would you react?**
- A. Wait for things to cool off, then go talk to him.
 - B. Chalk up his outburst to being a teen and ignore it.
 - C. Say, "You're not allowed to speak to me that way! Get back here!"
- 7. Your teen always says that her homework is done and school is fine. Her report card tells a different story. When you get upset about her grades, she says, "C'mon, Dad, I'm already stressed! You're just making it worse!" What would your response be?**
- A. "Honey, I'm hurt that you weren't honest with me. We need to talk about why this happened and how to make your grades better next time."
 - B. "Sorry, honey, I don't mean to stress you out, but you really screwed up. You need to fix these grades."
 - C. "You keep saying everything is fine with your school work, but you've been lying to me all along!"

ADDING UP YOUR SCORE:

- A = 3 Points
- B = 2 Points
- C = 1 Point

18-21: Your responses demonstrate that you're actively listening and responding in a non-judgmental and interested manner. You are sympathizing with your child, and your tone indicates that you're treating your child with respect. That's bonding.

13-17: For the most part, you seem to listen to and understand what your child is trying to tell you, but you still pass up a little judgment. Your responses can be a little confusing and a bit condescending. Try to avoid blaming or belittling your child by also asking them to engage in making the situation better. Acknowledge that they are mature individuals as well.

0-12: Most of your responses are rash and condescending. While some reactions may yield immediate solutions, they will agitate your child and create problems in your relationship. It is best to avoid responses in the "C" category as they tend to create distance between yourself and your child. You don't need to assert your position as a parent, but instead approach your child's situations with understanding and sympathy.

What your responses say about you:

1.

“You sound very sad about that, honey.”

This response says you understand what she’s feeling, it hides any judgments you may have, and it leaves the door open so she can tell you more. As she talks, respond with, “I see.” or “You must have been really angry.” This keeps her story flowing because she feels that you’re listening and you understand her.

“Well, honey, I’m sure it wasn’t your fault.”

The tone is supportive, but this response is really just a judgment. That won’t help you connect with her. Focus on what you see (her emotions). Help her get through the moment and think of ways to cope.

“That’s no big surprise. She’s such a snob. How could you stand her?”

Your teen is hurt and wants to talk about the fight she had. This response ignores what she needs, and may even trigger more anger if she feels like she has to defend her choice in friends.

2.

“I’m disappointed that you broke your promise. I need to be able to count on you. How can we make this work for both of us?”

Thanks to “I” statements, this response describes your feelings and needs without judging or blaming him. Plus, by asking him to help find a solution that works for both of you, you’re showing respect for his needs.

“Sounds like you’re feeling overwhelmed with all those commitments. I’ve got a few ideas about how we can fix that.”

This does a great job of summing up what you heard. Before you move on, let him confirm that you’re right. Then, instead of diving in to your ideas about fixing the problem (which he may see as a threat), invite him to suggest a few first. Even if his ideas aren’t practical, you’ll be showing him that his opinion matters.

“So? I’ve been at work all day, and now I have to cook dinner for you. What if I said, ‘Sorry, but I’m just too tired?’”

Sometimes questions can communicate information, but they don’t help here. At best, this response will embarrass him. At worst, he’ll think you’re picking a fight. Step away, take some deep breaths, and come back when you’re ready for a conversation.

3.

"I feel like that shirt isn't really appropriate for school. I need you to put a tee shirt on under it, or wait and wear it after school."

"I" statements do the trick here by keeping your judgment (and her embarrassment) totally under control. Plus, this response gives her a couple of options for getting what she wants. It's a win-win.

"I'm worried that shirt won't fly with the school's dress code. Go and pick something else."

You're off to a great start by saying there's an outside reason for your concern and letting her to be part of the solution. But it's not clear what kind of shirt is OK. Be specific. Try, "Go and put on that blue shirt you love so much." instead. Being too general can lead to confusion and more arguments.

"You're not wearing that shirt to school! You look like a tramp! Go change!"

This response may get immediate results, but embarrassing her and ordering her around won't build a strong parent-teen bond. Try persuasion using active listening and "I" statements instead.

4.

"I hear that you're frustrated. Wouldn't it be great if we could afford cars for you guys so no one had to share?"

This response shows that you understand that he's frustrated. Then by fantasizing a little, you show him that you sympathize with him and that you wish things were different, too. That's bonding.

"I realize it seems unfair, but we only have one car. We really don't have another choice."

This response starts well, but closes the door without letting him know that you sympathize. Try fantasizing out loud about crazy solutions. It shows you care, plus it can lighten up the mood and take the focus off of a problem you just can't fix.

"I own the car. I pay the insurance. I make the rules."

These sentences begin with "I", but aren't "I" statements. Plus, this response doesn't say anything about his complaint. Try, "I get frustrated sharing the car, too. But I need you to understand that what's most important for our whole family is for me to get to and from work. Any need you have for the car has to come second."

5.

"I feel nervous about letting you go off with someone I don't know. I need to meet him first."

This response beautifully spells out how you feel and what you need. From there, the ball is in her court. She gets to figure out how to make things right.

"Sweetie, if I don't look out for you, who will?"

This response is warm, but it's also confusing. Are you saying you love her and you're worried about her? Or that you don't believe she can take care of herself? It's hard to tell. She'll probably have trouble understanding your message, too.

"No way! I don't know him, and the last two guys you brought home were punks."

This response packs a double-whammy. It says you're not willing to hear her side and that she has bad taste in friends. Things can only go downhill from here.

6.

Wait for things to cool off, then go talk to him.

This works. Remember, he's pushing his limits because he knows it's safe — you won't ditch him. When you do finally talk, focus on yourself. Try saying, "I get angry when you treat me that way. When you talk to me, I expect you to use manners and not turn your back when it's my turn." No blame. No anger. Just a clear picture of what you need.

Chalk up his outburst to being a teen and ignore it.

Knowing how brain development affects his behavior helps here. Remember that teens have a hard time reading emotions, plus they don't yet have the best brain skills for stopping gut reactions. Give him some space. He'll probably regret his words. But if he doesn't say he's sorry, let it go. He may be too embarrassed.

Say, "You're not allowed to speak to me that way! Get back here!"

This only invites a fight. Let him cool down, then find a time to tell him — in a calm, blame-free way — how you feel about the way he treated you. Pointing out the effect he has on other people will help his brain mature and may even make your bond stronger.

7.

"Honey, I'm hurt that you weren't honest with me. We need to talk about why this happened and how to make your grades better next time."

There's no question — she lied to you. But this warm, supportive response doesn't contain a bit of blame. It simply tells her how you feel and invites her to talk about the dishonesty and the crummy grades.

"Sorry, honey, I don't mean to stress you out, but you really screwed up. You need to fix these grades." This response starts with sympathy, but quickly turns to blame (which doesn't help). Try telling her how her lying made you feel. It'll help her brain mature. Then, instead of leaving her in charge, work together to set up a homework system that keeps you in the loop.

"You keep saying everything is fine with your school work, but you've been lying to me all along!"

You know it's true. So does she. But this won't get you closer to better grades or a stronger bond. Try to find out why she lied. (The "I'm so stressed!" routine may have a deeper

meaning.) From there, work together on a plan that keeps you both on top of the homework and brings her grades up to a level that you're happy with.

Congratulations — you're now ready to try these communication techniques with your teen!

Not getting through? Don't sweat it.

Conversations get derailed sometimes. It happens to everyone. Just remember that most parents feel like they're at a loss for how to talk with teenagers. Here are a few tips for putting things back on track:

- Remember how moody you were as a teen? And how frustrating it was trying to express yourself? Your teen is in that boat now. So when he has an outburst, cut him some slack. It's normal.
- Don't worry about getting it all right the first time. In fact, if you're struggling with a really challenging subject, tackle it in a series of small talks instead of one big one. You may have better luck making your point.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you made a mistake and apologize for it. Reminding our teenagers that we're human doesn't have to damage our authority.
- Learn how to recognize typical teen behavior. It can help you keep your emotions under control and save you from falling into the same traps over and over