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opening extract from

How To Talk so Teens Will Listen and Listen so Teens Will Talk

written by

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How This Book Came to Be

The need was there, but for a long time we didn't see it. Then letters like this began to arrive:

Dear Adele and Elaine,

HELP! When my kids were little, How to Talk . . . *was my Bible. But they're eleven and fourteen now, and I find myself facing a whole new set of problems. Have you thought about writing a book for parents of teenagers?*

Soon after there was a phone call:

"Our civic association is planning its annual Family Day Conference and we were hoping you'd be willing to give the keynote address on how to deal with teenagers."

We hesitated. We had never presented a program that focused exclusively on teenagers before. Yet the idea intrigued us. Why not? We could give an overview of the basic principles of effective communication, only this time we'd use teenage examples and demonstrate the skills by role-playing with one another.

It's always a challenge to present new material. You can never be sure if the audience will connect with it. But they did. People

listened intently and responded enthusiastically. During the question-and-answer period they asked our views on everything from curfews and cliques to answering back and grounding. Afterward we were surrounded by a small group of parents who wanted to talk to us privately.

"I'm a single mom, and my thirteen-year-old son has started hanging out with some of the worst kids in the school. They're into drugs and who knows what else. I keep telling him to stay away from them, but he won't listen. I feel as if I'm fighting a losing battle. How do I get through to him?"

"I am so upset. I saw an e-mail my eleven-year-old daughter received from a boy in her class: 'I want to sex you. I want to put my dinky in your cha-cha.' I don't know what to do. Should I call his parents? Should I report it to the school? What should I say to her?"

"I've just found out my twelve-year-old is smoking pot. How do I confront her?"

"I'm scared to death. I was cleaning up my son's room and found a poem he wrote about suicide. He's doing well in school. He has friends. He doesn't seem unhappy. But maybe there's something I'm not seeing. Should I let him know I found his poem?"

"My daughter has been spending a lot of time online lately with this sixteen-year-old boy. At least, he says he's sixteen, but who knows? Now he wants to meet her. I think I should go with her. What do you think?"

On the car ride home we talked nonstop: Look at what these parents are up against! . . . What a different world we live in to-

day! . . . But have times really changed that much? Didn't we and our friends worry about sex and drugs and peer pressure and, yes, even suicide when our kids were going through their adolescence? But somehow what we had heard tonight seemed worse, scarier. There was even more to worry about. And the problems were starting earlier. Maybe because puberty was starting earlier.

A few days later there was another phone call, this time from a school principal:

"We're currently running an experimental program for a group of students in both our middle school and high school. We've given a copy of How to Talk So Kids Will Listen *to each of the parents in the program. Because your book has been so helpful, we were wondering if you'd be willing to meet with the parents and conduct a few workshops for them."*

We told the principal we'd give it some thought and get back to her.

Over the next few days we reminisced with each other about the teenagers we once knew best—our own. We turned back time and summoned up memories of our children's adolescent years that we had long since locked away—the dark moments, the bright spots, and the times we held our breath. Little by little, we reentered the emotional terrain of yesteryear and reexperienced the same anxieties. Once again we pondered what made this stage of life so difficult.

It wasn't as if we hadn't been warned. From the time our

kids were born we heard, "Enjoy them now while they're still small" . . . "Little children, little problems; big children, big problems." Over and over again we were told that one day this sweet child of ours would turn into a sullen stranger who would criticize our taste, challenge our rules, and reject our values.

So even though we were somewhat prepared for changes in our children's behavior, no one prepared us for our feelings of loss.

Loss of the old, close relationship. *(Who is this hostile person living in my home?)*

Loss of confidence. *(Why is he acting this way? Is it something I've done . . . or haven't done?)*

Loss of the satisfaction of being needed. *("No, you don't have to come. My friends will go with me.")*

Loss of the sense of ourselves as all-powerful protectors who could keep our children safe from harm. *(It's past midnight. Where is she? What is she doing? Why isn't she home yet?)*

And even greater than our sense of loss was our fear. *(How do we get our kids through these difficult years? How do we get ourselves through?)*

If that was the way it was for us a generation ago, what must it be like for mothers and fathers today? They're raising their kids in a culture that is meaner, ruder, cruder, more materialistic, more sexualized, more violent than ever before. Why wouldn't today's parents feel overwhelmed? Why wouldn't they be driven to extremes?

It's not hard to understand why some react by getting tough—why they lay down the law, punish any transgression, however minor, and keep their teens on a short leash. We can also understand why others would give up, why they'd throw up their hands, look the other way, and hope for the best. Yet both

of these approaches—"Do as I say" or "Do what you want"—cut off the possibility of communication.

Why would any young person be open with a parent who is punitive? Why would he seek guidance from a parent who is permissive? Yet our teenagers' well-being—sometimes their very safety—lies in having access to the thoughts and values of their parents. Teenagers need to be able to express their doubts, confide their fears, and explore options with a grown-up who will listen to them nonjudgmentally and help them make responsible decisions.

Who, other than Mom and/or Dad, will be there for them day in, day out, through those critical years to help them counter the seductive messages of the media? Who will help them resist the pressure of their peers? Who will help them cope with the cliques and cruelties, the longing for acceptance, the fear of rejection, the terrors, excitement, and confusion of adolescence? Who will help them struggle with the push to conform and the pull to be true to themselves?

Living with teenagers can be overwhelming. We know. We remember. But we also remember how we hung on during those turbulent years to the skills we had learned and how they helped us navigate the roughest waters without going under.

Now it was time to pass on to others what had been so meaningful to us. And to learn from this current generation what would be meaningful to them.

We called the principal and scheduled our first workshop for parents of teenagers.

Authors' Note

This book is based on the many workshops we've given around the country and those we've run for parents and teenagers, separately and together, in New York and Long Island. To tell our story as simply as possible, we condensed our many groups into one and combined the two of us into one leader. Though we have changed names and rearranged events, we have been faithful to the essential truth of our experience.

—Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

One

Dealing with Feelings

I didn't know what to expect.

As I ran from the parking lot to the school entrance, I held on tightly to my blowing umbrella and wondered why anyone would leave a warm home on such a cold, miserable night to come to a workshop on teenagers.

The head of the guidance department greeted me at the door and ushered me into a classroom where roughly twenty parents sat waiting.

I introduced myself, congratulated them all for braving the bad weather, and distributed name tags for everyone to fill out. As they wrote and chatted with one another, I had a chance to study the group. It was diverse—almost as many men as women, different ethnic backgrounds, some couples, some alone, some in professional attire, some in jeans.

When everyone seemed ready, I asked people to introduce themselves and tell us a little about their children.

There was no hesitation. One after the other, parents described kids who ranged in age from twelve to sixteen. Almost everyone commented on the difficulty of coping with teenagers

in today's world. Still, it seemed to me people were being guarded, holding back, making sure they didn't disclose too much too soon to a room full of strangers.

"Before we go any further," I said, "I want to assure you that anything we discuss here will be confidential. Whatever is said within these four walls remains here. It's no one else's business whose kid is smoking, drinking, playing hooky, or having sex a lot earlier than we'd wish. Can we all agree to that?"

Heads nodded in assent.

"I see us as partners in an exciting venture," I went on. "My job will be to present methods of communication that can lead to more satisfying relationships between parents and teenagers. Your job will be to test these methods—to put them into action in your home and report back to the group. What was or wasn't helpful? What did or didn't work? By joining forces, we'll determine the most effective ways to help our kids make that tough transition from childhood to adulthood."

I paused here for the group's reaction. "Why does it have to be a 'tough transition'?" a father protested. "I don't remember having such a hard time when I was a teenager. And I don't remember giving my parents a hard time."

"That's because you were an easy kid," said his wife, grinning and patting his arm.

"Yeah, well maybe it was easier to be 'easy' when we were teenagers," another man commented. "There's stuff going on today that was unheard of back then."

"Suppose we all go back to 'back then'," I said. "I think there are things we can learn from our own adolescence that might give us some insight into what our kids are experiencing today. Let's start by trying to remember what was best about that time in our lives."

Michael, the man who had been the "easy kid," spoke first. "The best part for me was sports and hanging out with friends."

Someone else said, "For me it was the freedom to come and go. Getting on a subway by myself. Going to the city. Getting on a bus and going to the beach. Total fun!"

Others chimed in. "Being allowed to wear high heels and makeup and that whole excitement over boys. Me and my girlfriends would have a crush on the same guy, and it was, 'Do you think he likes me or do you think he likes you?' "

"Life was so easy then. I could sleep till noon on weekends. No worries about getting a job, paying the rent, supporting a family. And no worries about tomorrow. I knew I could always count on my parents."

"For me it was a time to explore who I was and experiment with different identities and dream about the future. I was free to fantasize, but I also had the safety of my family."

One woman shook her head. "For me," she said ruefully, "the best part of adolescence was growing out of it."

I looked at her name tag. "Karen," I said, "it sounds as if that wasn't the greatest time in your life."

"Actually," she said, "it was a relief to be done with it."

"Done with what?" someone asked.

Karen shrugged before answering. "Done with worrying about being accepted . . . and trying too hard . . . and smiling too hard so people would like me . . . and never really fitting in . . . always feeling like an outsider."

Others quickly built upon her theme, including some who only moments before had spoken glowingly of their teen years:

"I can relate to that. I remember feeling so awkward and insecure. I was overweight back then and hated the way I looked."

"I know I mentioned my excitement over boys, but the truth is, it was more like an obsession—liking them, breaking up with them, losing friends because of them. Boys were all I ever thought about, and my grades showed it. I almost didn't graduate."

"My problem in those days was the pressure I was under from the other guys to do stuff I knew was wrong or dangerous. I did a lot of stupid things."

"I remember always feeling confused. Who am I? What are my likes? My dislikes? Am I true or am I a copycat? Can I be my own person and still be accepted?"

I liked this group. I appreciated their honesty. "Tell me," I asked, "during those roller-coaster years, was there anything your parents said or did that was helpful to you?"

People searched their memories.

"My parents never yelled at me in front of my friends. If I did something wrong, like coming home really late, and my friends were with me, my parents waited until they were gone. Then they'd let me have it."

"My father used to say things to me like, 'Jim, you have to stand up for your beliefs . . . When in doubt, consult your conscience . . . Never be afraid to be wrong or you'll never be right.' I used to think, 'There he goes again,' but sometimes I really did hang on to his words."

"My mother was always pushing me to improve. 'You can do better . . . Check it again . . . Do it over.' She didn't let me get away with anything. My father, on the other hand, thought I was perfect. So I knew who to go to for what. I had a good mix."

"My parents insisted I learn all kinds of different skills—how to balance a checkbook, change a tire. They even made me read five pages of Spanish a day. I resented it then, but ended up getting a good job because I knew Spanish."

"I know I shouldn't be saying this, because there are probably a lot of working mothers here, including me, but I really liked having my mother there when I got home from school. If anything upsetting happened to me during the day, I could always tell her about it."

"So," I said, "many of you experienced your parents as being very supportive during your adolescent years."

"That's only half the picture," Jim said. "Along with my father's positive sayings, there was plenty of stuff that hurt. Nothing I did was ever good enough for him. And he let me know it."

Jim's words opened the floodgates. Out poured a torrent of unhappy memories:

"I got very little support from my mother. I had a lot of problems and needed guidance badly, but all I ever got from her were the same old stories: 'When I was your age . . .' After a while I learned to keep everything inside."

"My parents used to lay these guilt trips on me: 'You're our only son . . . We expect more from you . . . You're not living up to your potential.'"

"My parents' needs always came before mine. They made their problems my problems. I was the oldest of six and was expected to cook and clean and take care of my brothers and sisters. I had no time to be a teenager."

"I had the opposite. I was so babied and overprotected, I didn't feel capable of making any decisions without my parents' approval. It took years of therapy for me to begin to have some confidence in myself."

"My parents were from another country—a whole other culture. In my house everything was strictly prohibited. I couldn't buy what I wanted, couldn't go where I wanted, couldn't wear what I wanted. Even when I was a senior in high school, I had to ask permission for everything."

A woman named Laura was the last to speak.

"My mother went to the other extreme. She was far too lenient. She didn't enforce any rules. I came and went as I pleased. I could stay out till two or three in the morning and nobody cared. There was never a curfew or any kind of intervention. She

even let me get high in the house. At sixteen, I was doing coke and drinking. The scary part was how fast I went downhill. I still experience anger at my mother for not even trying to give me structure. She destroyed many years of my life."

The group was silent. People were feeling the impact of what they had just heard. Finally Jim commented, "Boy, parents may mean well, but they can really mess a kid up."

"But we all survived," Michael protested. "We grew up, got married, started families of our own. One way or another, we managed to become functioning adults."

"That may be true," said Joan, the woman who had referred to her therapy, "but too much time and energy went into getting past the bad stuff."

"And there are some things you never get past," Laura added. "That's why I'm here. My daughter is beginning to act out in ways that worry me, and I don't want to repeat with her what my mother did to me."

Laura's comment propelled the group into the present. Little by little, people began to voice their current anxieties about their children:

"What concerns me is my son's new attitude. He doesn't want to live by anyone's rules. He's a rebel. Same as I was at fifteen. But I hid it. He's out in the open. Insists on pushing the envelope."

"My daughter is only twelve, but her ego craves acceptance—especially from boys. I'm afraid that one day she'll put herself in a compromising position, just to be popular."

"I worry about my son's schoolwork. He's not applying himself anymore. I don't know if he's too into sports or just being lazy."

"All my son seems to care about now are his new friends and being cool. I don't like him hanging out with them. I think they're a bad influence."

"My daughter is like two different people. Outside the house she's a doll—sweet, pleasant, polite. But at home, forget it. The minute I tell her she can't do something or have something, she gets nasty."

"Sounds like my daughter. Only the one she gets nasty with is her new stepmother. It's a very tense situation—especially when we're all together for the weekend."

"I worry about the whole teen scene. Kids these days don't know what they're smoking or drinking. I've heard too many stories about parties where guys slip drugs into a girl's drink and about date rape."

The air was heavy with the group's collective anxiety.

Karen laughed nervously. "Well now that we know what the problems are—quick, we need some answers!"

"There are no quick answers," I said. "Not with teenagers. You can't protect them from all the dangers in today's world, or spare them the emotional turmoil of their adolescent years, or get rid of a pop culture that bombards them with unwholesome messages. But if you can create the kind of climate in your home where your kids feel free to express their feelings, there's a good chance they'll be more open to hearing your feelings. More willing to consider your adult perspective. More able to accept your restraints. More likely to be protected by your values."

"You mean there's still hope!" Laura exclaimed. "It's not too late? Last week I woke up with this terrible feeling of panic. All I could think was that my daughter wasn't a little girl anymore and there was no going back. I lay there paralyzed and thought about all the things I did wrong with her, and then I felt so depressed and so guilty.

"Then it hit me. Hey, I'm not dead yet. She's not out of the house yet. And I'm always going to be her mother. Maybe I can learn to be a better mother. Please, tell me it's not too late."

"It's been my experience," I assured her, "that it's never too late to improve a relationship with a child."

"Really?"

"Really."

It was time to start the first exercise.

"Pretend I'm your teenager," I said to the group. "I'm going to tell you a few things that are on my mind and ask you to respond in a way that's guaranteed to turn most kids off. Here we go:

"I don't know if I want to go to college."

My "parents" jumped right in:

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course you're going to college."

"That is the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"I can't believe you would even say that. Do you want to break your grandparents' heart?"

Everyone laughed. I continued airing my worries and grievances:

"Why do I always have to be the one to take out the garbage?"

"Because you never do anything else around here except eat and sleep."

"Why do you always have to be the one to complain?"

"How come your brother doesn't give me a hard time when I ask him *for help?"*

"We had this long lecture on drugs today from a policeman. What a joke! All he did was try to scare us."

"Scare you? He's trying to knock some sense into your head."

"If I ever catch you using drugs, you'll really have something to be scared of."

"The trouble with you kids today is that you think you know everything. Well, let me tell you, you've got a lot to learn."

"I don't care if I've got a fever. No way am I missing that concert!"

"That's what you think. You're not going anywhere tonight—except bed."

"Why would you want to do anything that stupid? You're still sick."

"It's not the end of the world. There'll be plenty of other concerts. Why don't you play the band's latest album, close your eyes, and pretend you're at the concert."

Michael snorted, "Oh yeah, that oughta go down really well!"

"Actually," I said, "as your child, nothing I heard just now went down really well with me. You dismissed my feelings, ridiculed my thoughts, criticized my judgment, and gave me unsolicited advice. And you did it all so easily. How come?"

"Because it's what's in our heads," Laura said. "It's what we heard when we were kids. It's what comes naturally."

"I also think it's natural," I said, "for parents to push away painful or upsetting feelings. It's hard for us to listen to our teenagers express their confusion or resentment or disappointment or discouragement. We can't bear to see them unhappy. So it's with the best of intentions that we dismiss their feelings and impose our adult logic. We want to show them the 'right' way to feel.

"And yet, it's our listening that can give the greatest comfort. It's our acceptance of their unhappy feelings that can make it easier for our kids to cope with them."

"Oh boy!" Jim exclaimed. "If my wife were here tonight, she'd say, 'See, that's what I've been trying to tell you. Don't

give me logic. Don't ask all those questions. Don't tell me what I did wrong or what I should do next time. Just *listen*!' "

"You know what I realize?" Karen said. "Most of the time I *do* listen—to everyone except my kids. If one of my friends were upset, I wouldn't dream of telling her what to do. But with my kids it's a whole other story. I move right in. Maybe it's because I'm listening to them as a parent. And as a parent, I feel I have to fix things.' "

"That's the big challenge," I said. "To shift our thinking from 'how do *I* fix things?' to 'how do I enable my kids to fix things for themselves?' "

I reached into my briefcase and handed out the illustrations I had prepared for this first meeting. "Here," I said, "in cartoon form are some basic principles and skills that can be helpful to our teenagers when they're troubled or upset. In each case you'll see the contrast between the kind of talk that can add to their distress and the kind that can help them to deal with it. There are no guarantees that our words will produce the positive outcomes you see here, but at the very least they do no damage."