

Asking Important Questions, Encouraging Honest Answers

by: Linda O'Neill



“How was your day?” “Fine.”

This is a familiar exchange between parents and their early adolescent children. What can parents do to encourage early adolescents to share important information, new ideas, or significant experiences? Over the past decade and a half, I have observed teachers posing important questions and encouraging honest answers in urban, suburban, and rural schools. They share similarities in their questioning and listening strategies with effective parents. Using active listening skills, parents are more likely to hear what adolescents really think when they:

Ask open ended questions (who, what when, where, why, how). While this is one of the basics of active listening, we often forget it. Last year, a teacher asked a 7th grade class, “Are you a good friend?” A chorus of students answered “Yes”; a few answered “No.” But they talked at great length with high energy when asked, “What is a good friend?”

Develop a comfort level with “wait time” even when silence hangs in the air. Young people often need extra time to formulate their thoughts, especially when the questions or the situations are new. Busy teachers and parents need patience to provide this time. If we follow up with additional questions too quickly, young people may feel they are being interrogated.

Withhold initial judgments while adolescents try to come to grips with difficult questions, confusing dilemmas, and unsettling emotions. Sometimes the things early adolescents say cause us to cringe. Fortunately, when we allow them to “think aloud” and then restate what they have said so they can hear it again, they often “correct” or refine their ideas. Confirming and clarifying sends a message that we are trying to understand first and foremost, before judging.

Ask specific questions to encourage short conversations about a particular topic. Asking hypothetical questions about dilemmas that arise at school, in the neighborhood, or in the news, especially those that do not directly involve them, can encourage adolescents to analyze what they might do in similar situations, evaluate alternative actions, and test their ideas with an adult.

Establish a regular practice of shared questioning and listening, gradually developing adolescents’ capacities to articulate, clarify, test, refine, and affirm their own thinking on a wide range of topics. This practice prepares them to face their own personal dilemmas.

Resource: Kaye, S. M. & Thompson, P. (2007). *Philosophy for teens: Questioning life's big ideas*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc.