

EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY



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Beyond Small Talk

Connecting With Teenagers Through Conversations That Matter

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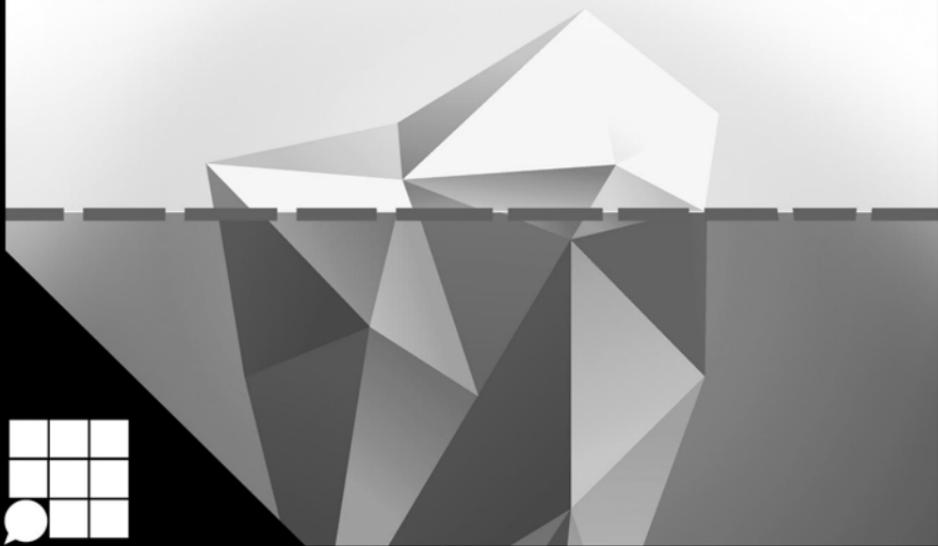
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BEYOND SMALL TALK

Connecting With Teenagers
Through Conversations That Matter

BY RACHEL BLOM



AN **EVERYDAY YOUTH MINISTRY**
RESOURCE FROM SIMPLY YOUTH MINISTRY

:: THE VOICE OF THE IN-THE-TRENCHES YOUTH WORKER

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Introduction

Youth work is rooted in communication. There's not much we can do to impact the lives of students if we fail to communicate with them. And a lot of this consists of personal talks with one or more teenagers.

Small talks and big talks, deep conversations and surface-level ones, profound exchanges on life and quick updates on sports or music or the weather—we youth workers talk a lot! But getting students to talk to us, to really share what's in their hearts and on their minds—that can be quite a challenge.

Yet it's imperative that we talk with them, that we succeed in opening up a real dialogue, because we have the best news ever to tell them: the news of a God who loved them so much that he gave everything he had to prove it.

To be able to share that news, we have to connect with students and engage them in a dialogue. It may start as a rather uninspiring conversation about the latest movie or TV series, but it may just end up in a life-changing talk that will impact a student's life forever.

Getting teenagers to talk with us is something we can learn, something we can grow in. This book is designed to help you do just that. In it, you will find tips and advice for connecting with teenagers and getting them to open up to you. Try these ideas out, and find out what works best for you.

Stacks of books have been written about both the science and the skills of communicating well. I don't have any illusion whatsoever that this book covers everything there is to say on this topic with regards to students. It's merely meant as a very practical, hands-on guide for developing better communication with teenagers and getting them to open up to you.

Don't be disheartened if you don't succeed at first, because getting to a real heart-to-heart level with teenagers isn't always easy. Keep trying until you find a style that is uniquely yours and fits how God has wired you. May God bless you.

Rachel Blom

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CHAPTER 1: LISTENING

It may seem counterintuitive to start a book on getting teenagers to talk to you with some thoughts on listening. I am convinced, however, that it's the most important skill of all when it comes to communication. There's not much sense in getting people to talk to you if you're not able or willing to listen.

I read this great book years ago about the differences in communication when men and women respond to someone sharing what's on their heart (Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*.)¹ In general, women will seek to maintain the status quo and will affirm the other person's feelings, offering sympathy and a shared experience: "I had the exact same thing last year when I...." Men, on the other hand, will seek to establish their superior position by offering advice: "Here's what I would do."

But let's face it, neither approach shows good listening skills per se. Being a good listener means responding in a way that makes the other person feel heard and understood. At the height of emotions, most of us not only don't *want* to hear advice, we actually *can't* hear it. And we can get frustrated when someone starts sharing a story, because it distracts from and diminishes our story. What we need is someone who will just listen.

Think about it for a second: How do you feel when someone is really listening to you with undivided attention? That feels good, doesn't it?

I am convinced that many teenagers are looking for just that: someone who is willing and able to simply listen. They want to be heard. We often feel like we need to offer advice or say something profound, but most of the time for teenagers, just being heard or being listened to is enough. The opportunity to offer advice will come later; just start with listening. It's what the Bible tells us to do, too: *My dear friends, you should be quick to listen and slow to speak or to get angry (James 1:19).*

So how good a listener are you? Are you indeed “quick to listen and slow to speak”?

What a good listener looks like

This is what it means to be a good listener:

You listen without formulating your reply

Often when we listen to someone else, we're formulating our response in our head. Martin Saunders describes the “listening skills” during prayer meetings

in his book *The Beautiful Disciplines*² in the funniest way ever:

First, I listen to the inevitable list of prayer requests, and select one that a) I completely understand, and b) doesn't sound too difficult to pray for. Then, as voices begin to fill the silence, I start work on my masterpiece: a poetic form of words that would have T.S. Eliot on his feet applauding. I work out my first line, then my second. Then I try to come up with some sort of sound bite for the middle part that will make everyone else in the circle make an affirmative 'hmm' noise, as if someone had just switched on seven food mixers. Then I make sure I know how I'm going to land, for fear of ending with one of those awful fudgy forms of words like 'for the Father Jesus Christ's holy sake'. Then I wait for a gap, and launch into my dramatized poetry reading. And, of course, I have listened to and engaged with none of the other prayers.

He writes this about prayer meetings, but it applies to any kind of conversation, really. If we are focused on formulating our response, it means we are above else focused on ourselves and not on the one talking. As a consequence, we miss important things the other person is saying. In a worst-case scenario, we

interrupt—we don't even wait until the other person is finished talking. When we start doing that, we can be sure we've pretty much stopped listening.

You listen without waiting for “your turn”

If you're listening while all the time waiting until it's your time to speak, you're not listening at all. You're just waiting, and impatiently at that.

True listening means you just want to hear what the other person is saying and you don't necessarily need to speak. Good listening isn't just about certain skills. At the heart, it's about wanting to serve instead of being served. As the late Stephen Covey formulated so well, it's about seeking to understand before being understood.³ Good listeners let go of their own ego and are willing to come last because they want to understand the other first. This verse from Proverbs sums it up pretty nicely:

It's stupid and embarrassing to give an answer before you listen (Proverbs 18:13).

You'd be amazed how more listening and less talking can positively impact the conversations you have!

You listen without interpreting

We all filter the words of others through our own filter, colored by our knowledge, experiences, personal hang-ups, and other factors. In short: We interpret. But interpreting is often the opposite of good listening because we use our filters, not the filter of the other person in the conversation. It's hard to listen without interpreting, because it requires us to really let go of our own needs and baggage.

Self-knowledge helps here. If you know you tend to use a “negative self-worth” filter and interpret remarks in such a way that they reinforce a negative self-image, that's something to watch out for when listening to others. You have to switch off this filter, so to speak, and let others interpret or explain what happened through their own filters. It's no guarantee that it's the right interpretation, but at least you're not projecting your own experiences onto the conversations.

If you want to make sure you've understood someone correctly and are not coloring your conclusions with your own interpretations, summarize in that person's own words or ask clarifying questions. Both are explained in more detail below.

You listen for clues

If people would always simply say what they really meant or felt, interpersonal communication would be a whole lot easier. We all know that's not the case, however. People—and this definitely includes teenagers—can communicate in terms we don't always understand.

There's a hilarious scene in the movie *Shrek* where Shrek is trying to communicate to his friend-against-better-judgment Donkey that there's more to ogres than meets the eye. Shrek uses an onion as an analogy to explain what ogres are like—but Donkey completely misses the point. Ogres make people cry? Ogres turn brown when left out in the sun? They stink? No, an infuriated Shrek says: They have layers!

In my experience, conversations with students can be like that. They'll try to explain something by using comparisons or terms or even cultural references we don't understand or immediately recognize. So we need to listen for clues to what teenagers are really trying to say. Often these clues have to do with emotions and feelings, so that's something to pay attention to in conversations. Many times these will be

worded as an understatement (“I didn’t like it when my sister moved out”).

You summarize

The technique of summarizing will help you better understand your conversation partner. It will also help you interpret more correctly. This works especially well if you summarize with the same words the other person used. This reduces the chance that you will interpret his or her words through your own filters.

Also, hearing their own words back can have a pretty powerful effect on teenagers. It’s effective proof that you have listened, but it also helps them to face what they are feeling and put it into words. Students may start by saying one thing but will dig deeper because you keep summarizing what they are saying until they get to the core of the issue.

Summarizing can sound like this:

“So what you are saying is that you are mad at your sister for moving out because now you don’t have anyone to help you when you’re fighting with your mom.”

You ask questions

One of the most powerful tools in listening is asking questions. Later on in this book, we'll dig deeper into the art of asking the right questions to get people talking, but here I want to stress the importance of three types of questions: factual questions, clarifying questions, and "why" questions. Here's how to use them:

- Factual questions are the "what," "when," and "how" questions you almost automatically ask to get a complete picture of what someone is telling you about an event. These questions are meant to get the other person to explain in more detail what happened exactly, in what order, and how. These are very helpful, especially at the beginning of a conversation to gather the facts. Here's an example: "What happened after he ran out? Did he ever come back?"
- Clarifying questions are the questions you ask to make sure you've understood the other person. They can be summaries formulated as a question ("So you're upset because he never

called you back, is that right?") or "proper" questions ("He never called you back?"). If what the student is saying is not clear to you, keep asking clarifying questions until it is. Make sure you understand what this person is really saying before moving on.

- "Why" questions seek to dig deeper into the feelings and reasonings of the teenager you're talking to. You don't just want to know what has happened; you also want to know why and how he or she is feeling. So you ask "why" questions: "Why did you decide to run away?" or "How did it make you feel that your mom forgot to pick you up?"

Usually, you won't get to the core of the "why" with just one question. Carmaker Toyota developed a technique called the "five whys" to get to the root cause of a problem or a defect in a car. This technique is focused on a process analysis and simply keeps asking "why" five times to get to the real problem in the process.⁴ That's how many "why's" it takes to dig deep enough and discover more than superficial solutions. So don't be satisfied with the first answer to a why question,

but keep digging until you feel you're at the root of the problem.

You have to be subtle, however, because these types of questions can make people defensive. If they are asked why in a style that's too confrontational or perceived as too "attacking," students may get defensive and you might get nowhere in your conversation. So make sure you "dig" lovingly.

I've had to learn to listen better, and I'm still not the greatest listener on the planet. But I've discovered that good listening skills can be developed and that I can train myself in listening better. So if you're a bad listener, don't think you're not cut out to build relationships with teenagers. Just pray for God to help you grow in this area, and then focus on listening well whenever you're talking to someone. You'll notice you'll get better at it over time.

Active listening posture

Additionally, there's the issue of your listening posture. Your body language can communicate that you're really listening or that you couldn't care less. Here's what an active listening posture looks like:

- **Keep a comfortable eye contact:** You don't have to look the other person straight in the eyes the whole time because let's face it: That would creep anyone out. Just maintain a level of eye contact that makes you both feel comfortable.
- **Get rid of distractions:** Put away your book, magazine, tech gadget, or whatever you were holding in your hands. And don't play with anything either, like a pen or a paperclip or something else, because it can be hugely distracting to the conversation.
- **Face the other person:** This is not always possible, as sometimes you come into contact with teenagers in the most random places, but it's a good rule to follow whenever possible. I once had a really good and deep conversation with one of my students while driving to an event—obviously we weren't able to face each other then! Leaning forward just a bit will also show your interest.
- **Offer appropriate touch:** I've found that a spontaneous touch can communicate that

you're really listening, and it can be a huge encouragement for someone to keep sharing. I'm talking about a quick squeeze of someone's hand, arm, or shoulder. Just make sure it's appropriate and doesn't last too long.

- **Give verbal encouragements:** Have you ever tried talking to someone who didn't respond to you in any way? I have, and it made me very uncomfortable and not the least bit inclined to keep talking. Your conversation will benefit from some verbal encouragements, like “uh-huh” and “really?” and the like.
- **Give nonverbal encouragements:** This should come naturally if you're listening well, because it's just a matter of responding nonverbally at the right times with a smile, or nodding or shaking your head—nothing you need to practice!
- **Sit still:** No, you don't have to become a statue from a wax museum, but it's usually good to not move too much. If you keep moving or fidgeting, this signals unrest and can make the other person feel that you're bored.

- **Mirror the other person:** Mirroring is an effective technique to create a connection, a rapport with the person you're talking to.⁵ It means you very subtly copy their posture as to unconsciously signal you're like them. You can help them become more open by first copying their posture and then subtly changing it into a more open body language (such as changing folded arms into open arms).