



The secrets to communicating effectively with teenage boys

by Michael Grose

Communicating with adolescent boys can often consist of a series of questions (asked by parents) followed by monosyllabic answers (from your son). This can then deteriorate into grunts at certain ages or when your questions cut too close to the bone. For boys, mumbling or grunting monosyllabic answers is a great way to keep parents out of their lives.

However, it's important to continue to connect with your son, so here are some practical ideas to help you stay in the game with your teenage boy:

1. Don't shut them down

Boys often learn from a young age to keep their problems in. If a boy comes to his parents and says he has a big test tomorrow and he is really nervous it is easy to shut him down with remarks about his lack of study and messy bedroom. If he receives this type of response when he tentatively presents issues, then he will learn to shut down and keep his problems to himself in the future. It is really important for parents to read the subtext of a boy's conversations and requests. They frequently don't know how to say what is on their mind or how they are feeling. They can be very clumsy. Realise that your son may have something bigger on his mind than the presenting issue or question.

2. Respect their space

Boys tend to be cave dwellers when things go wrong for them. A bad day at school may be followed by an angry outburst on arrival home, particularly if he is asked that time-honoured question: "How was your day?"

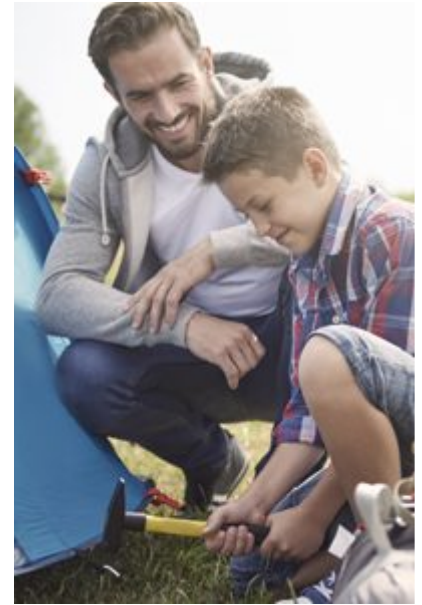
"&^\$%%!!" may well be the response as he slams his bedroom door behind him. He has just entered his cave where he will take his time to settle his thoughts and generally turn within to draw on his internal resources. Resist the temptation to knock on his door and lovingly say, "Darling, is everything alright? Would you like to talk about it?" You are only inviting more rejection. The best solution is to wait until he comes out of his cave before you talk. Generally, he will come out when he has made some sense of what has happened to him and is ready to engage. This is the time to talk.

3. Get moving together

One way to get boys talking is to get them moving. Go for a walk together, wash the dishes together or do some other job and you will find their tongues loosen up. The pressure to speak is removed by activity. More than this, males are activity based. Just as activity and play is the language of fatherhood, activity is the mode to get many boys to open up and talk.

4. Ask what they think to find out how they feel

The way to a boy's heart is through his mind! If you want to find out how a boy is feeling, ask him what he is thinking. For instance, if he experiences rejection at school and he is obviously unhappy, ask him what he thinks about the situation rather than how he feels. He will actually tell you how he feels in the process. It is important that parents understand this and put this knowledge to good use if they want an entry point into their son's emotional life.



5. Keep the banter up

Esteemed educator Dr Tim Hawkes, author of *Ten conversations you must have with your son*, maintains that banter and small talk are essential elements in conversations with boys. Fun, trivia and jest are the foundations for more serious, significant conversations that a parent will have with their sons. If you are always serious – particularly a father – then a primary or secondary school-aged boy is less likely to listen to you than if you have the balance right between silly and significant.

6. Reinforce more than nag

Your effectiveness as a communicator to boys will be enhanced if you get the (positive) reinforcement to (negative) nagging ratio right. Many teenage boys benefit from being reminded about doing the right thing by others, being smart and acting confidently, but that doesn't mean that you should nag them all the time. They'll switch off to your message in a heartbeat. They're more likely to listen if you regularly point out their positives ("I love the way you..."), bite your tongue more than you speak (when you want to tell them how to behave), and choose your timing and words carefully when you have something important to say to them. Despite your best communication techniques there will be times when feelings aren't shared, information is withheld and secrets are kept. As frustrating as this is for parents, it's a young man's prerogative to keep things close to his chest. When your son really clams up it's best to be open in your communication style and be on hand for when he eventually wants to talk. Parental availability is an underestimated parenting strategy.

Learn some great skills and knowledge to help you successfully raise the boys in your family in my practical 3-week Parenting Boys course. It's available now at Parentingideas.com.au.



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*Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 10 books for parents including *Thriving!* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World* and *Last Borns Want to Change It*, and his latest release *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children*.*