

INSIGHTS

Being an askable parent



In a recent conversation, a 16 year old told me how he's enjoyed some great conversations with his father since the COVID-19 pandemic. What I heard from this young man was that his father is not just an affable person but also a very 'askable' parent.

The young man told me that he could talk to his dad about anything, which I suspect would be music to his father's ears. I imagine that many parents would love to hear their kids say that about them. The notion of being a parent that young people can discuss personal problems with and seek answers to some of life's bigger issues such as politics, religion and sexuality has been a source of personal reflection and study over many years.

While young people can be notoriously secretive about what's on their mind, parent attitude and behaviour certainly impacts on their willingness to communicate. The following strategies will maximise your chances of being seen as an askable parent in your young person's eyes:

Be there

Proximity aids communication and relationship-building. The more time you spend in close proximity to a young person the more likely you are to have meaningful conversations.

Be attentive

Pay close attention when a young person starts a conversation or asks a question, as they are easily put off by parental indifference. Many young people experience difficulty articulating their thoughts, so they are extremely appreciative when parents pay them full attention when they have something to say.

Listen without judging or advising

Giving unsolicited advice is a sure-fire way to prevent young people confiding in you. Young people are more likely to discuss personal matters and difficult subjects if they know their thoughts and feelings won't be judged adversely or that they'll be deluged by advice. The use of Ahh statements ("Ahh, so that's what's bothering you?") is a great way to show young people that you are listening without judgement or advice.

Be prepared to challenge

There are times when you need to challenge the validity of a young person's views, their behaviour or the values they express. Misinformation, disrespectful attitudes and revelations about unsafe behaviour need to be discussed rather than ignored or criticised. It's wise to pick a time and a place that's likely to promote rational discussion rather than responding when emotions are high.

Engage in banter

Respected Australian educator Dr. Tim Hawkes writes in his book *Ten Conversations you must have with your son* that light-hearted banter is a prelude to more serious discussions. Not only does banter build relationships but it gives parents' permission to discuss thorny or personal issues with kids.

At a time when a parent's voice is easily drowned out by increased media and digital noise, it's more important than ever to connect with a child or teenager on a personal level. Being an askable parent will help you build deeper connections with the young person in your life.



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Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.