

5 Words You Should Avoid—and 3 to Use—When Talking With Your Teen

If your child is like most, there is one five-word phrase they hate:

“When I was your age ...”

We parents use that expression to try to empathize with our kids, but given the cultural differences between today and when we were younger, those five words trigger our kids’ warning signals. Either they think we are trying too hard to relate (a cardinal sin few kids tolerate) or perhaps even worse, we are underestimating the differences between today and decades ago.

It’s not that our learners, explorers and focusers don’t want us to talk about our past. Most young people want to hear their parents talk about the roller-coaster ride of their own adolescence and young adulthood. But we have to share those experiences in subtler ways, never prefacing them with “When I was your age ...”

As our 19-year-old rents their first apartment, we look for indirect opportunities to volunteer mistakes we made with our own first landlord.

As our 21-year-old is preparing their resume, we sneak into the conversation some glimmers of our own nervousness before past job interviews.

To help our single 29-year-old know we can relate to any angst he may feel about the likelihood of a future marriage, we circuitously share humorous (as well as not-so-humorous) memories about our own attempts to find—and impress—potential

romantic interests.

Even though they don't always show it, most of our kids are open to hearing about our past. Our task is to find the less obvious back door (or maybe even trap door) that opens up the right conversation at the right time.

Three Words to 'Warm' Your Relationship with Your Young Adult

In my (Steve's) home, Jen and I have mounted a simple sign that reminds all five of us of one of our family mottoes: "Tell me more." Jen and I chose this family mantra when our oldest was in high school and our youngest was in elementary school because in the midst of a society that is relentlessly self-focused, we want to fight for conversational momentum in our family.

Prior to adopting this motto, our typical conversation with our daughters often started with Jen or me asking, "How was your cross-country meet?"

"Good."

We would respond, "Cool."

That's as far as we got. So we added a new follow-up question: "Oh yeah? Tell me more!"

I remember walking past one of my daughters who was sitting on the couch and looking distraught. We caught each other's eyes, and my daughter said, "I think I'm going to break up with my boyfriend." In that moment, my first instinct as a dad was to cheer. My second instinct was to worry and be inclined to ask her, "What's-wrong-what-did-he-do?" Instead, I managed to pause long enough for a *tell me more* moment and asked, "What's up?" She shared that her anxiety wasn't about her decision to break up, but *how* to break up in a way that was kind because she still valued his friendship. We talked about different approaches, and I had a chance to offer support in the way she

really needed it. I still remember the hug she gave me that day and her whispered, “Thanks, Dad.” But if I had followed my initial impulse, I could have blown the opportunity.

No matter how close you feel to your kids, you are likely getting an edited version of their lives. They often present a (very!) abridged version of their “fine” day at school, their killer Saturday night out with friends, or their rising credit card debt (Arnett et. al., *When Will my Grown-Up Kid Grow Up?*, 44.) Remember that there’s so much more to the story, but fear of your lectures or your increased anxiety may prevent them from sharing. Strategically asking your child to “Tell me more” might open up some conversational doors that are otherwise locked tight. {eoa}

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