

Attentive listening helps teens open up, study finds

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Engaged listening techniques such as eye contact, nodding and using key words to praise openness helps teenagers when they admit bad behavior and share hurt feelings with their parents, a new study has shown.

University of Reading and Haifa researchers asked 1001 13 to 16-year-olds to watch a staged conversation between a parent and teenager about a difficult situation, with the parent adopting different body language and listening behavior in different versions.

The participants who watched the versions where the parent was visibly attentive stated that they would have felt better about themselves as the teenager and would be more likely to open up about their feelings again in the future.

The study, the first to look at quality of listening in isolation from other parenting techniques, revealed that being more engaged while listening made the teenagers feel more authentic and connected with the parent.

Dr. Netta Weinstein, associate professor in clinical and [social psychology](#) at the University of Reading, who co-led the study, said that "we all know that listening to someone talk about their problems is an effective way of reassuring them and establishing a connection. However, until now there has been little thought given to the quality of that listening, and the difference that makes."

"This study shows that in parent-teenager relationships, quietly listening to a [teenager](#) while showing them they are valued and appreciated for their honesty has a powerful effect on their willingness to open up."

For the study published in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, a roughly even split of male and female adolescents were recruited, with three identifying as another gender. The team found that [active listening](#) was equally important across all participants.

The first video conversation scenario portrayed a teenage boy admitting to his mother that he had tried vaping and felt ashamed, and in the second he tells his mother he was rejected by his peers after refusing to

vape and felt hurt.

Each video scenario had a version where the parent listened attentively, and another where they appeared more distracted, and used less eye contact.

"With such a large group of participants, it is reassuring to see that active listening was universally beneficial across these years of adolescence," Dr. Weinstein said. "The study has some important implications for teenage wellbeing as well. The participants said that the good listening model observed in the videos would lead to better wellbeing. Although we don't know how often the expectations meets reality, but it's clear that active listening is more likely to lead to a good outcome for teenagers than the more passive style we tested it against."

More information: Netta Weinstein et al, Parental listening when adolescents self-disclose: A preregistered experimental study, *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jecp.2021.105178](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2021.105178)

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