

**Lessons from Columbine:
What Parents can do to get their teenagers to talk with them.**

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At this time, 10 years after the massacre at Columbine High School, it is reasonable to ask ourselves two questions: What have we, as parents, learned from that incident and its aftermath, and what can we do to help prevent future school shootings?

The good news is that there *are* lessons that have been learned from that tragic incident and others like it, and there are actions that parents can take that will help them and their student to do their part in helping to prevent another such incident.

In the years just after the Columbine incident, two studies, one conducted by the FBI's renowned National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime¹ and the other by the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education², came up with strikingly similar findings and recommendations. Two of the findings are relevant in the context of what parents can do to help prevent another such incident.

The first finding from both studies is that *there is no accurate profile of a school shooter*. School shooters have come from all ethnic, economic, and social classes. They are not the "misfits or outcasts." Most shooters had no history of violence and came from solid, two-parent homes.

The second finding is that the shooters did not just "snap," and strike out at their fellow students, rather they planned their attack for some period of time, ranging from a day or so, to over a year. And it is during this planning period that they often show what the FBI calls "leakage." The Secret Service found that 81 percent of shooters had explicitly revealed their intentions, and prior to most incidents, the attackers' peers knew the attack was to occur. Most attackers were not "invisible," but already were of concern to people in their lives.

Both reports also recommended a multifaceted approach, and one way to implement that involves establishing primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention. The primary level involves finding out about "behaviors of concern," and the best source of information about students who have made threatening statements is from the students themselves. The second level requires a multidisciplinary team to evaluate the identified behaviors of concern and make recommendations regarding an

¹ The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective.
<http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf>

² The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative.
http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf

appropriate intervention, if necessary. The third level of prevention is physical security at the schools.

So what do these findings and recommendations mean for us as parents? Simply, but importantly, we must take an active role in a multifaceted effort to prevent these types of incidents, and one way we can do that is by establishing open lines of communication with our teenagers.

Here is how these two findings and parenting skills complement each other:

Since the primary level of prevention is through interpersonal interaction between parents and our children, then, if we can, through effective communication with our teenagers, provide an environment where they feel more comfortable talking with us about the issues they are dealing with, we can help them make better, more responsible decisions regarding the many social and interpersonal challenges they experience.

Second, if they are talking with us about interpersonal issues, those discussions can include behaviors of concern of other students. Finally, they must come to believe, based on our actions, that if they talk with us about such behaviors of concern, we will respond in a constructive, helpful way.

So, how do we do this?

By using the same communication techniques and Active Listening Skills used by crisis intervention professionals and law enforcement crisis negotiation teams around the world. These skills are used in what is often a “worst case” scenario to convince a person in an emotional crisis not to hurt others and/or himself. They are the best skills that such professionals have at this time, and have been “field tested” for the last 30 years.

If they can be helpful in a “worst case” scenario in an effort to prevent homicide and/or suicides, I believe they can help create open lines of communication, at a much earlier stage, with your teenager.

Remember that the initial objective of using these skills initially is to foster open, honest communication between you and your teenager, not to “fix the problem” at this time. We have many “roles” as parents, including guardian, teacher, and sometimes judge and jury, among others. In these circumstances, I am suggesting that you take on the role of “mentor,” that is...“somebody, usually older and more experienced, who advises and guides a younger, less experienced person.”

Once there is ongoing communication, then these same skills can be used to help them find an acceptable solution to the problem.

General Communication Techniques

Setting the stage

Find a time when you and your teenager are less likely to be interrupted, and are not multitasking. It will be more effective if you (or your teenager) are not driving, watching TV, on the computer, washing dishes, or doing housework.

Environment and your demeanor

Choose a location in your home that is comfortable and private.

Turn off your cell phone, and ask him to turn off his³ phone.

Don't "double team" him. He may be overwhelmed if both you and your spouse are present. With only one parent at a time talking with him, the communication skills discussed below will be more effective.

Listening (and understanding) is a precursor to problem solving.

It is more important to be a good listener than a good talker.

Listening will provide you with important information...everything he says will tell you something about what is happening and why.

Your first and continued efforts should be to attempt to understand what he is concerned or upset about.

Your second effort should be to demonstrate to him that you are listening.

Your third effort should be to demonstrate to him that you do understand what the problem or issue is.

These efforts will set the stage for mutual problem solving, which will occur later.

Demonstrating understanding of his feelings and concerns does not mean agreeing with his possible actions.

Listening (actively) will:

Allow you to actually better understand what his issue(s) are, which will demonstrate (to him) that you do understand, and help you to be perceived as empathetic and understanding.

³ I'll use the masculine pronoun for simplicity, but these skills are equally effective for boys and girls.

Allow you to see the problem through his eyes. (People in conflict want to be understood.)

Verbal Communication skills:

Take your time; speak slowly and calmly.

Your tone indicates your attitude; it often speaks louder than your words.

How you say something is as important as what you say.

Remember:

The primary purpose of this (first) conversation is not for you to “fix the problem.”

The purpose is for you to attempt to understand clearly what he is concerned, upset, or angry about, and to demonstrate to him that you do understand those concerns.

Active Listening Skills

Listening for emotions:

1. People communicate on two levels:
 - Content - the simple facts (the circumstances)
 - Emotions - the emotional reaction to the facts (feelings about circumstances)
2. Train yourself to listen for the emotions surrounding the content.
3. His emotional reaction and subsequent behavior are what may make the situation a problem, not simply the facts of the situation.
4. How he feels about a situation will strongly influence his behavior.
5. Helping him control his emotions will help him control his behavior.

Active Listening Concepts:

Active Listening Assumptions:

People who make clear statements of how they are feeling are in a better position to solve their problems.

When a listener (you) is able to reflect the speaker's feelings, the listener is perceived as being empathetic and understanding.

Commonality of Feelings

A common statement in early conversations is something like: "You don't (or can't) understand what I am going through!"

While it is probably true that you have not had exactly the same experience that he has had, you have (almost certainly) had similar feelings sometime in your life. So, it is possible to understand someone else's feelings without having gone through exactly the same experience. Pointing this out may help work around this seeming "barrier" to communication.

The Seven Active Listening Skills

The seven primary active listening skills are listed here, with examples and explanation following.

Identity the Emotion:

Tentatively identify the feeling or emotion you are concerned about: "You sound...", "You seem...", "I hear ..."

Open - Ended Questions:

"What?", "When?", "How?"

--- or ---

"Tell me more about ...", "I'd like to hear more about ..."

Note the absence of the question: "Why?"

Minimal Encouragers:

They indicate your presence and attention... "Uh-huh,... OK,... I see, etc."

Paraphrasing:

Put what you hear him saying into your own words

Reflecting / Mirroring:

The "gist", the last couple of words or phrase that he said

Effective Pauses/Silence:

Used to allow him to continue talking or immediately before or after saying something meaningful

"I" Messages:

"When you ...", "I feel ...", "because ..."

Active Listening Skills: Explanation and examples:

Identify the Emotion:

This is usually the first of the active listening skills that you use.

After "setting the stage," and ensuring that both of you are paying full attention to each other, you can begin by indicating which emotion you think he is feeling and that you are concerned about it:

"Something *seems* to have really made you angry."

"It *sounds like* something is very frustrating to you."

"You *seem* to be confused about something that has happen."

Note that each statement *tentatively* identifies his emotions.

Never: *Tell* him how he is feeling. E.g.: "John, you are just angry about what Mary said." That will almost certainly result in "You have no idea how I am feeling!"

If you tentatively identify his feelings, he may either confirm it ("Yes, I am mad at Jim for what he did!") or correct it ("No, I'm not mad, I'm frustrated!"). Either way, you now have a better idea of what emotion he is feeling.

On the other hand, he may respond with "You wouldn't understand," or, "Just go away and leave me alone!" or "It's none of your business!" These types of statements often elicit the "parental finger," accompanied by "Don't you talk to me that way, young man!"

I think you would agree that such a directive response by you at this time would decrease the likelihood of him opening up and talking about his feelings and what his problem is. Remember the earlier emphasis on entering the role of a mentor for these types of discussions.

Repeating, in a non-authoritarian tone of voice, something like, "Hmmm...It does *seem* like you are pretty upset by something," may avoid a breakdown in communication early on.

Open ended Questions

Once you have helped him to identify the emotion, and the associated problem, the next active listening skill you can use is open ended questions. For example:

"Jim, how did this get started?"

"Mary, what happened at the party last night?"

"John, what led up to this?"

Using "How" or "What" at the beginning of the question will usually result in a narrative response, rather than a one word answer.

Your tone of voice is as important as the actual words. You are trying to initiate a candid conversation, not grill him on what happened.

I suggest avoiding beginning the question with "why." Generally, when we ask a person "why" in regard to his behavior, it implies criticism (Why did you do that?), and will often result in the answer, "I don't know." Using "what led up to this?" or "how did this start?" will get you the same information as using "why?"

As he is answering the question, listen! Don't interrupt, let him talk. You will be able to fill in gaps shortly by asking additional open ended questions.

Minimal Encouragers

These common utterances, like "Uh-huh,... OK,... I see," indicate that you are actively listening and that you understand what he is saying.

This is usually the most frequently used of the active listening skills, since we commonly do this in most of our conversations.

But, the presence of only minimal encouragers can also indicate "passive listening." We often see this when we are talking "to" someone who is involved in some other activity, like watching television. In this circumstance, the "uh-huhs" do not

indicate “active listening,” but are rather “social fillers” used to pretend the person is listening.

Using direct eye contact and “setting the stage,” by not doing something else while talking will help demonstrate that you are really actively listening.

Paraphrasing:

After you have identified the emotion and used open ended questions, and he has told you how he feels and how the problem developed, then you can summarize, using paraphrasing, and put his story and his emotions in your words:

“Let me make sure I understand what you're saying...” or, “If I understand you correctly, you are saying that (this happened) and you feel (this emotion) about what happened.”

Using paraphrasing will indicate two important things:

- You have been listening to him, and
- You have some understanding of the problem as he sees it.

Reflecting/Mirroring

Sometimes he may say something very emotionally, for example:

“This is the worst day of my life!” or,
“Sometimes I just feel like smashing something!” or,
“John will be sorry for what he said!”

At this point in the discussion, I would suggest using reflecting or mirroring, where you simply repeat the gist of what he said, with an implied question.

“The worst day of your life....?”
“You just feel like smashing something?”
“John will be sorry for what he said?”

Notice each example is a question, designed to keep the person talking about his or her feelings. It will be tempting to respond with something like: “Oh, Jim, you don’t really mean that!” or “You had better not do that!” or “John, things aren’t that bad!”

I do not mean to imply that you would accept him smashing something or retaliating for something someone else did, but, at this point in the conversation, your primary objective is to keep him speaking openly and honestly with you. Later, once he believes that you do understand how he feels and what he is going through, he will be more likely to allow you to help him decide what the best course of action may be.

Effective Pauses/Silence

During this conversation, you do not have to have an immediate response to everything he says. It is okay to allow a few minutes to pass without you or him saying anything. This gives him time to reflect on what he has said, or perhaps begin to formulate some acceptable solution to his problem.

This use of silence may also provide a stimulus for him to continue talking and provide more information to you.

Finally, the deliberate use of silence may allow him time to think about something you have said or to provide emphasis to something you are about to say. For example, you might say something like: "Joe, from what you have said, I can see a possible solution to the problem," and then deliberately stop talking.

If you have used identified his emotions, used open ended questions and paraphrasing, and he now recognizes that you do understand the problem he is dealing with and how he feels about it, he may respond with: "What do you suggest?"

At this point, *since he has asked you for your opinion*, you could respond with something like: "What do think would happen if you...?" or, "How do you think it would turn out if you...?" Remember you are attempting to help him solve his problem, not "fix it for him," or tell him what to do.

"I" messages

He may say something during the conversation that is of concern to you, particularly if it implies causing harm to someone, including himself. If that sort of statement occurs early in the conversation, I suggest delaying your response until you have had a chance to demonstrate to him, by the use of the active listening skills above, that you have been listening and, as much as possible, you understand *his issue* and his emotional response to the issue.

Later in the discussion, once you feel that he believes that you have been listening and do understand what he is dealing with you can use an "I" message to respond to something that has caused concern.

The "I" message should contain these parts: "When you... (describe what he said)", "I feel... (state how you feel about it) ", "because... (provide a reason for your reaction)."

For example, if he indicated he might physically retaliate for something someone said or did, you could say:

“Jim, when you say you are going to get Pete for what he did, I get concerned, because I believe that’s not the only way you can handle this.”

If he continues to state that he may respond inappropriately, you can say: “Jim, if you do that, what do you think will happen then?” He may respond with “I don’t know.” Here, you can say “I understand you don’t *know*, but what do you *think* might happen?”

Once he has described what he thinks may happen if he responds a certain way, a logical follow on question is: “And do you think that will make things better or worse for you?”

You are simply helping him to recognize possible consequences of his behavior and accepting that he is responsible for his actions.

“I” messages can also be used to reinforce a positive statement that he has made.

“John, when you say that you will think about what we have been talking about, I feel relieved, because I believe you are a reasonable person.”

Things to avoid:

- Simply responding to his overt behavior, particularly if it is anger. For example, an early response from him might be: “Just go away and leave me alone!” or “It’s none of your business!” These types of statements may elicit the “parental finger,” accompanied by “Don’t you talk to me that way, young man!” Staying in the “mentor” role and identifying the emotion present may keep him talking with you.
- Talking to him, rather than listening to him. Remember, the objective at this point is to get him comfortable talking with you by showing you are listening and understand what he is upset about.
- Trying to “solve his problems too early.” For example: “Why don’t you just?” Remember, the purpose of these active listening skills is to get him to feel comfortable talking openly and honestly with you, not to tell him what to do. Further, your next efforts will be to get *him to make an acceptable decision* about what to do.
- Piling on, or double teaming, that is, having too many other people in the discussion.

Barriers to Active Listening

(Adapted from the Houston PD Crisis Intervention Training Manual)

- Arguing
- Criticizing
- Jumping to conclusions
- Pacifying
- Name Calling
- Ordering

Arguing

- Example to avoid: “You don’t know if that really happened.”
- Alternative: “I am not clear on what led up to this.”
- Or: “Will you help me understand what led up to this situation?”

Criticizing

- Avoid making him feel worse.
- Example to avoid: “If you didn’t get so mad, this sort of thing wouldn’t happen.”
- Alternative: (If you must say something about his show of anger) “Do these situations usually get worked out okay if you get so angry?”

Jumping to conclusions

- Don’t tell him what you think the problem is.
- Example to avoid: “You know, I think you are wrong about what you think happened.”

Pacifying

- Don’t belittle the situation
- Example to avoid: “You know, things aren’t really all that bad.”

Never: Tell a depressed person “things aren’t that bad.”

Alternative: I can see that this is very important to you and you are very concerned about it.

Name Calling/Labeling

- “Labeling” the person or the behavior
- Example to avoid: “You would have to be crazy to think of doing that”

Ordering

- Early on, an authoritative approach may create more resistance.
- Example to avoid: “If you would just do what I am telling you...”

Other Barriers to Communication

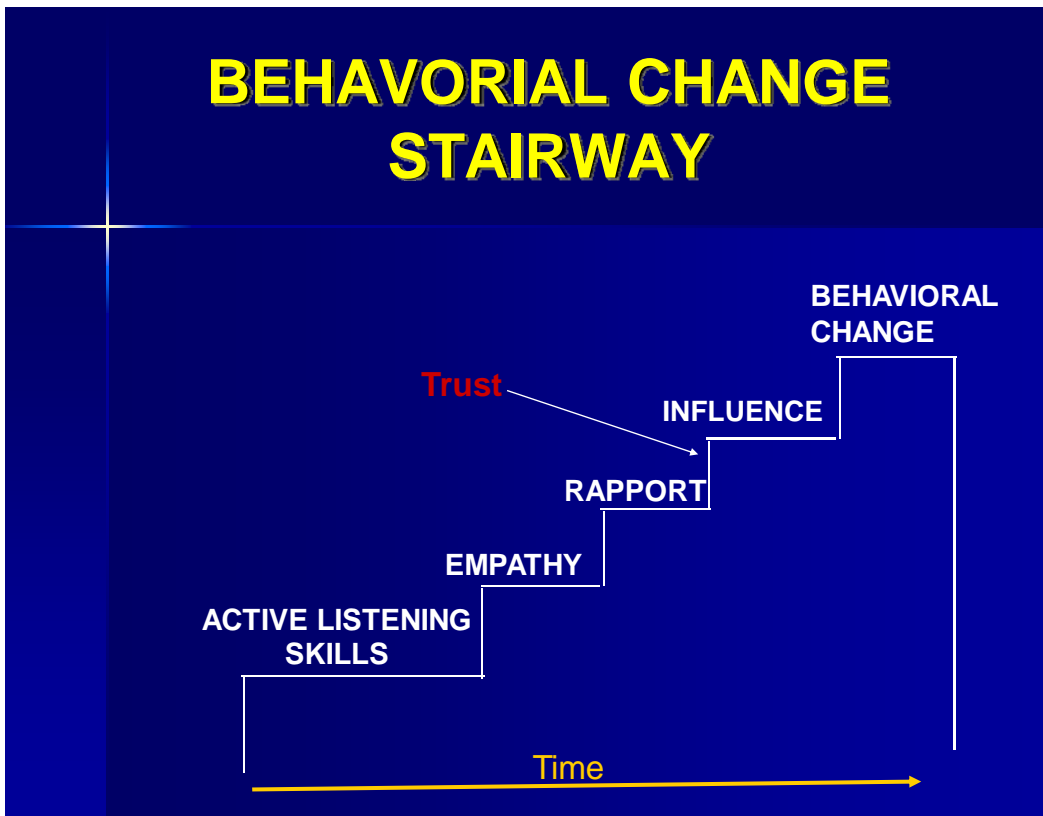
- Interrupting. Once again, the primary objective early on is to allow him to feel comfortable talking about his feelings and problems with you.
- Use of the word "but." Beginning a sentence with “Yes, but...” will sound to him like: “Yes, but...you’re wrong,” and will interfere with your attempts to keep him talking with you.
- Not paying attention to what he is saying (because you are trying to perfect your response to his statements).
 - *It is more important to be a good listener than a good talker.* You don’t have to, and in fact, shouldn’t be trying to “think ahead” about what to say. You should be listening to what he is saying and using paraphrasing to indicate you did understand what he said.

The Behavioral Change Stairway

This is a visual representation of the behavioral change process that can begin with the use of Active Listening Skills.

When a parent uses Active Listening Skills (consistently):

- the teenager perceives that the parent has empathy (identifies with and understands his feelings or difficulties);
- which develops rapport (a mutual liking, trust, and a sense that they understand and share each other's concerns);
- which allows trust to develop (his parents will listen to him, and attempt to understand his feelings and problems, not just tell him what to do);
- which leads to influence (being able to affect his thinking and actions);
- which allows him to make better decisions.



Benefits of using Active Listening Skills

1. If your teenager has heard another student talk about doing something harmful to himself or others, your teenager may be more likely to tell you or other adult.
2. If your teenager is having a difficult time with some problem, and is showing signs of depression or inappropriate anger, or any other problem, he may be more willing to talk with you about the situation.
3. Use of these communication skills can help you and your teenager (spouse, or friends), have a closer, mutually enjoyable relationship.

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