



## Validating and Reflective Listening with Your Teen

We often start problem solving, lecturing, or setting limits before we really understand the problem.

Child: “I’m not going to school today.”

Parent: “Oh yes you are!”

Of course, being a good parent means we give the child limits; however, we often give advice or set limits before we understand the real problem. An old adage says, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” There may be some truth in this, but a critical element is missing. A more correct way to say the adage would be, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you understand.” People (including children and teens) will be more resistant if they don’t feel like the other person has made a good faith effort in trying to understand their point-of-view. So before you lecture (e.g., “How many times do we have to talk about this?!?”), problem solve (e.g., “Well, why don’t you try this...”) or set limits (e.g., “Over my dead body are you going to...”), try these steps first- you can always do the other stuff later.

1. Your goal is to first **validate**. Validate **does not** necessarily mean you agree. It simply means that you are trying to understand the other person’s point-of-view. Remember, most kids (especially teens) will not request to “talk”, so you will have to initiate these steps when you see that the child is frustrated, sad, or anxious (e.g., “What’s up?”).
2. The best way to validate is to **reflect**. Reflection means paraphrasing (not parroting back) the child or teen’s concerns and feelings. For example:

Teen: “I’m quitting school!”

Parent: “What’s up?” (Not: “Like hell you are!”, which is setting limits)

Teen: “My teachers are totally unfair”

Parent: “Sound like things are pretty frustrating” (The parent is reflecting feelings. Not: “I’m sure some of your teachers are understanding”, which may be true but the teen will feel this is a lecture and will tune out)

Teen: “Yeah, they expect all of this work to be turned in. There just isn’t enough time.”

Parents: “Sounds like the pressure to turn everything in is getting pretty intense.” (Reflecting content. Not: “Well, have you tried talking to them about how you feel?”, which may be something to try later, but this is problem solving too soon and the teen will resist).



3. **Summarize.** Start by saying, “Let me see if I got this...” and try to reflect everything they have said. End with, “Is that right?” Keep doing this until you can see the child physically relax and agree that you have understood. If you don’t see them relax, chances are you’ve slipped into problem solving, lecturing or limit-setting mode.

Parent (continuing from above): “Let me see if I got this. Right now school is really hard because of everything that is expected of you. It doesn’t seem like there is enough time to turn things in. You’re really frustrated right now. Is that right?”

Teen [who visibly seems more relaxed and less defensive]: “Yeah, it’s just so hard...”

4. Ask “**What Else?**” The initial concern is usually just the surface problem. Only after someone feels heard do they say what is really bothering them. Make sure you’ve got the whole story before trying to solve a problem that may not be the real issue.

Teen [continuing from above]: “... that no one understands how difficult it is to go through this.”

Parent: “First, thanks for telling me about what was happening. I know things are hard for you but you did a great job telling me what was going on. What else is frustrating you?” (Not: “I was your age once too, you’ll be fine.”, which may be true but will still be perceived as lecturing)

Teen [more slowly]: “Jenny told Mike that I like him. I can’t believe she went behind my back like that.”

Parent: Continues to reflect, summarize, and say “What else?” until teen acknowledges that everything is “on the table.”

5. Give them a **choice**. As demonstrated above, thank the teen for opening up and ask if they need you to listen more or if they want your help problem solving. If they want your help problem solving, give them the first chance at it. No one likes to be told things they already know or have already tried.



Parent: “I’m sorry you’re having such a rough time. Do you want me to listen more or do you want to brainstorm some ways we could solve the problem?”

Teen: “I guess it would be okay to talk about how to help, but I don’t know of anything.”

(Warning: If teen says something defensive like, “Go ahead and try – it’s hopeless”, then you need to spend more time listening)

Parent: “Well I have some ideas, but what are some things you’ve tried?”

**Note:** Of course, you can ask questions to clarify something if you don’t understand, but make sure you are not asking leading questions. For instance, there is a big difference between, “What did the teacher say next?” and “Why do you think the teacher said that?” (*Implication*: you must have done something wrong to make the teacher act that way).

#### **When not to use:**

- When you are being verbally or physically attacked. It is one thing if your child is just venting some mild frustration at you; however, it is something else if your child is whining excessively or is being hostile. Before doing the steps above, say to them, “I want to help you, but I can’t talk to you when you’re screaming at me [or whining]. Can you please say that in a way that doesn’t make me feel attacked?” If your child refuses (based on how they act- not what they say), simply state, “Okay, we will talk later” and walk away. Be sure to approach your child when they have calmed down with something like, “Are you ready to try again?”
- When you feel like you are being manipulated. Sometimes teens (especially those with behavioral disorders) will use “lets talk” moments as a way to change house rules or turn a parent against someone else (e.g., another parent, a sibling, etc...). If you feel like this is happening, you can still follow steps 1 through 4. This way you will know the child or teen’s concern; however, instead of step 5, thank the child for telling you his or her feelings and state that you need to talk to the child’s other parent or “think about it” and excuse yourself. If a child is being manipulative, they will demand you agree with one of their solutions right then and there. Later, you can re-approach your child in “parent mode” where you set limits by stating what behavior is and is not acceptable (and potential consequences). If possible, try negotiation. This way you can integrate your child’s concerns into solving the problem. This is especially important with teens.
- When you are not emotionally ready. It is best **not** to use these steps when you are frazzled, distracted or emotionally upset. Your child will sense this and shut down. Besides, even if you start



off calm, most kids are adept at prematurely suggesting “solutions” parents know won’t work (e.g., “I’m never going to school again”) or saying something scary for parents to hear (e.g., “My friend thinks I should have sex”). It may help to practice these steps with a spouse or friend first. A key is not to respond to the child or teen’s emotionality with increased emotionality. Someone has to stay empathetic, yet in control. If you get scared, frustrated or are simply too tired, it is okay to explain this:

- *Too Tired or Busy:* “Sorry, I’m really exhausted. I can tell something is wrong and I want to talk, though. Can we talk more after dinner or some other time?” [*Warning:* If you say something like this, it is *your* responsibility to approach the child again- don’t expect them to re-approach you.]
- *Child prematurely suggests a solution you can’t accept:* For example, the child says they are never going to school again. Parent: “I’m not sure what we are going to do yet. Right now it is more important that I listen. We can talk about ways to solve the problem later, if you want. You were saying you’re frustrated...” (parent continues to reflect, summarize, and clarify until the child seems more calm)
- *Child says something that scares us:* “Sorry, but knowing that your friend wants you to have sex is freaking me out. Just the parent in me I guess (slight laugh). I’ll try to listen more” or “... can we talk later?” Remember validating doesn’t mean agreeing, you can always go back later in “parent mode” and set limits regarding behavior. Don’t jump to conclusions. In this case, the child may not want to have sex either, but may simply be worried about the pressure she feels from friends. You’ll never get at this, however, if we prematurely lecture or problem solve.