

# HOW TO TALK TO ANY YOUNG PERSON

## an intergenerational conversation toolkit



a resource from FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

### 7 TIPS FOR HOW TO TALK TO BOYS AND GET THEM TO TALK BACK:

**1. Boys want to connect, they often just don't know how.** Boys themselves attest to their need for parents and adults who are there for them, even though they may act like they could care less. So even when you get brushed off, don't give up on connection. Don't pull away permanently, even when he does temporarily.

**2. Don't interrogate.** One of Wiseman's boys shares, "The first thing my mom says to me every day after school is, 'Tell me five things that happened at school today.' Five. She exhausts me." And when he can't remember five things or isn't in the mood to unpack his day immediately, she feels like he's hiding things and he gets annoyed. So what can we do instead? First, recognize that the school day can be completely exhausting when you figure in the combination of academics with complex social dynamics. Wiseman suggests, "Your goal is to make the first few minutes stress-free. If you do this, he'll be much more likely to tell you about how his day was on his own. Try asking no questions when you see him." After some time, invite him to share one high and one low. And be willing to share your own. Then leave him alone.

**3. Try the night.** Most boys respond best when they're winding down later in the evening, or when they're going to bed. Even though this means staying up later for older teens, it's worth it occasionally to wait up and see if he's more receptive to sharing a conversation.

**4. Boys usually say, "I'm fine, don't worry about it," when they're really feeling the complete opposite.** They're trained to shrug away concern and show calm detachment. Offering a simple, "I'm here if you want to talk about it later" leaves a door open without forcing an interaction.

**5. Offer them your help, but also a pathway to another adult.** There are things your son won't want to tell you, but needs to tell someone. Most of the time that distinction needs to be made by him, not you. So how do you navigate all that while still making sure he's getting adult help? Here's a suggestion from Wiseman: "If ----- [whatever you're wondering about] ever happens to you, you know you can talk to me. Or if you don't want to talk to me, let's think of someone that you would like to talk to." Your son should have a few adult allies he can turn to that he knows will take him seriously and won't break his trust by telling you.

**6. Do something together.** Boys often talk more freely when they're sharing an activity—a sport you both like, going on a hike, playing video games together, or doing something you know he's interested in, whether or not you share the interest. Household chores can also become conversation starters when they're shared rather than done individually. Stay away from phrases like, "Let's spend time together," or "I don't see you enough anymore," and instead offer something like, "Do you want to go to lunch?" Wiseman suggests, "Lunch has a definite beginning and end. Plus, you're feeding him." Brilliant. Be careful about raising the pressure for every experience together to be about deep bonding. That's likely to push him away.

**7. Don't say these two things.** First, never, ever, ever call him a girl (or say he runs/hits/throws/anything else like a girl). Ever. Aside from the fact that it's degrading to girls, you will lose some of the respect he has for you, and you could drain him of any personal dignity. Second, never say "I'll take care of this," or its many counterparts, in response to a problem he's facing. Taking over his battles will only cripple his ability to learn to face hard things, and will likely make him resent your control. One more thing: Be prepared to be changed by what you hear. This is Wiseman's definition of listening. If we're actually paying attention to what our boys tell us, we have to be willing to change in response.

**FURTHER READING:** *Rosalind Wiseman, Masterminds & Wingmen: Helping our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of Boy World (New York: Harmony, 2013).*

## 6 TIPS FOR HOW TO TALK WITH GIRLS:

**1. Practice your timing.** Girls often feel like their parents pummel them with annoying questions. What makes them so annoying? Timing, for one thing. “A girl will bristle when her parents ask questions at the wrong time—when she’s deeply engaged in her work, already halfway out the door, or closing her eyes to catch a little extra rest on the couch on a quiet afternoon,” Damour says. Pick your moments rather than making every discussion a battle; the pushback may only be because the conversation is based on your timing. If you pitch a fastball question and miss, be willing to let it go and try again later. Maybe much later. Similar to adolescent boys, be prepared for girls’ openness to deeper conversations to shift later and later into the evening.

**2. Let her answers shape the conversation.** Girls despise conversations that start with preplanned direction, right answers, and adult agendas. Instead, they want questions fueled by our genuine interest in their lives and their thoughts. Let them put a topic on the table they’re open to exploring. Pick up a lead they’ve left you recently (even if it was in the form of a complaint—e.g., about a teacher, coach, or friend). And hold your idea or probe for later. Great tools for these kinds of conversations include phrases like, “I wonder what that’s been like,” “Tell me more about that,” as well as other responses that mirror back something she just said (“So you’re getting excited about the overnighter with your friends next weekend.”)

**3. Be the emotional dumping ground sometimes.** One conversational tactic of adolescent girls involves unloading their own uncomfortable feelings and complaints onto their parents so they don’t have to carry them alone. Damour helpfully reframes this practice: “Complaining to you allows your daughter to bring the best of herself to school.” Most often the teenager who is blowing off intense steam about incredulous teachers, annoying boys, and an unfair homework load is the same teenager who carries herself with relative cool and friendliness through the school day. She’s learning the adult skill of managing her emotions and responses, holding them until she’s in the presence of a trusted adult who can handle a day’s worth of pent up irritation and anger. Research shows we all have a finite amount of willpower, and it turns out that teenage girls’ willpower tends to run out right about the time they close our car door or drop on our couch after a full day at school.

In these moments, we often need not do anything, fix anything, or even say anything helpful. Instead we serve the important function of a nonjudgmental, listening ear. If you must respond, Damour suggests offering a question like, “Do you want my help with what you’re describing, or do you just need to vent?”

**4. Help her distract herself from ruminating on problems.** One typical difference between adolescent girls and boys is that while boys tend to look for distraction when they’re dealing with emotional distress, girls turn to talk. They’re more likely to talk about feelings, and while that can be generally helpful, at times over-focusing

on a problem can lead down roads of anxiety and depression—whether that problem is their own or one they’ve internalised from a friend. One skill we can teach girls is to utilise distraction to cope with intense feelings. We might offer to do something together, change up her environment, pull her into fun or even goofy conversations, or serve together in a way that shifts the focus off the current problem.

**5. Move beyond her “veil of obedience.”** Damour highlights teenage girls’ ability to keep nodding and smiling while utterly blocking out everything an adult is saying. Though guys can do this too, they’re more likely to verbally disagree or at least look away. Girls, on the other hand, become masters at giving us what we want—compliance—while internally stuffing their own thoughts and feelings. Part of our work as parents and caring adults is to help girls put down these “veils of obedience” and engage with us when they disagree. While this is far less pleasant for us in the moment, in the long term it does girls a big favor because they will learn to advocate for themselves and their ideas. Next time a girl in your life seems to quietly agree with your assessment, instruction, or (let’s be honest) lecture, pause and say, “I see you nodding, but I wonder what you really think?” or, “I’ve just said a lot. I’d like to hear your thoughts and feelings about this, too.” Or perhaps, “What feels right about what I’ve just said? What feels maybe not right?”

**6. Teach her to work toward repair—by modeling it.** Conflict, struggles, and relationship ruptures are bound to happen with teenage girls, in particular as they work toward gaining autonomy from their parents. We can help girls grow in emotional intelligence in the midst of these strained relational moments by helping them learn to step outside themselves and take the perspective of the other person. This is a brain-growth task of adolescence, and our part in this work comes by modeling perspective-taking.

For example, after a heated conflict cools down, we may be able to offer a window into our response (“When you said those words, I felt this way, and responded by saying some harsh things in return. Looking back, I see where you were coming from, and here’s where I was coming from. I’m sorry that my response hurt you. Let’s figure out a way to move on.”) Learning to repair relationships through building empathy must first happen in relationships supported by deep trust, meaning parents often bear the brunt of this work. However, the dividends of investing in emotional intelligence pay off in relationships with peers and, eventually, families of their own.

**FURTHER READING:** *Lisa Damour, Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood (New York: Ballantine, 2016).*

