
ChangemakerTeens

The World Is Waiting For You...



Parent Changemaker Challenge

Request #3: Understand

If you UNDERSTAND me, I will feel appreciated.

What does it mean to UNDERSTAND?

As parents, I think we throw around the phrase, “I understand”, more than we should. Do we really understand what our teens are telling us? Or are we just trying to move the conversation along? I’ve said “I understand” to my teens so many times, but honestly? I have no idea what it’s like to be them. I’m not really sure that I do understand what they’re trying to tell me. And I certainly don’t understand how it feels to be a teen in today’s world. It’s light years away from what I experienced as a teenager so long ago!

But there are practices we can learn in order to do a better job of understanding our kids, no matter what their age. When we combine respect and listening, especially level 2 or 3 listening, understanding is all but inevitable. The key here is to approach your children from a model of assessment, not diagnosis. If you assume they are broken, you will not be listening to understand. Instead, you will be listening to fix what’s wrong with them. You will be diagnosing a problem that may or may not really be there.

So, look at the person, not the behavior. Assess how your teen (or young child) is seeing the world. Think about what is important to them. What do they value? How are they hard wired? And don’t be surprised if they are wired differently than you. In fact, chances are excellent that they are, and that’s ok. But it’s really important that you acknowledge your differences and allow them to grow and mature in a way that works for them. Teenagers crave compassionate understanding and to be “heard”. From the parents perspective, understanding is all about empathy and concern. It is NOT having all the answers. Again, this is very hard to do because we are hardwired to fix their problems and share how we handled similar situations way back when. Try not to look at your teen’s behavior. Instead, look at them as a person. Look at their relationships, and how different they are from you.

EXAMPLE #1:

Let's say your teen has a tough time with homework. It's a struggle for her every day and the two of you fight about it constantly. You insist that she do her homework the moment she gets home because that's how YOU would do it. You were the kind of student who needed to get a project, like homework, out of the way immediately or you would never get to it and it wouldn't get done.

But maybe your daughter is not like you. Maybe she's the type of person who needs to unwind when she gets home. Maybe she needs a little "down" time to watch tv or hang out with her friends before she sits down to do her homework. What worked for you, will not necessarily work for her. And the only way you will know what works for her is to talk about it. And yes, really listen to what she is telling you. Try it her way for awhile. It's obviously not working your way, so what do you have to lose? Let her set her homework schedule and see if things calm down between the two of you.

You need to understand your differences. Remember, you can't MAKE anyone do anything. If you are butting heads with your teen: Stop. Assess. Breathe. And then talk to him or her. Use your new listening skills to really hear what they are saying. Decide together if there might be a better way for her to accomplish whatever she is struggling with.

Then let her try it her way. And watch the magic happen!

Practice Understanding

Did you feel understood by adults when you were a teen? If so, try to remember what made you feel that way. If not, consider going out of your way to make sure your children feel understood. Share their perspectives without any other obligation.

Make a sincere attempt to understand where your teen is coming from. Instead of dwelling on the huge social changes between your youth and theirs, try looking at what you have in common. Think about how you like to be understood and how you know that the other person has really “heard” what you’re saying. Then transfer that feeling to your conversations with your teens.

PRACTICE #1 - ASK

Ask your teen if they feel like you understand them or if they feel heard. You can do this in a general sense or refer to a specific situation. Simply ask during a conversation, “Do you think I understand you?” If they say no, don’t be defensive. Continue the conversation and listen to their answer. Use their insight to do a little better the next time you are faced with a situation that requires your understanding. Check in with your teen often about this. Keep working on it and you will improve.

PRACTICE #2 - SAY IT

Start using the term, “I understand,” with your teen and your younger children. Using this language reinforces our desire to understand, and shows our teens that we really are trying. Before you say the words, though, put yourself in their shoes and imagine how life must be for your teen today. Try saying the word “understand” at least once a day for a couple of weeks as it is happening and see if you feel like you are really starting to understand your teenager a little bit more each day.

One word of caution, though. Do not overdo this or make it sound like you are not sincere. It’s really important that you use the words in the most genuine way and when it really is appropriate to say. Kids will see right through an attempt to be fake. Don’t be that person! Be patient and there will be enough opportunities to show them that you really are trying to understand what’s happening in their lives!

PRACTICE #3 - BREATHE

Break the habit of offering advice or solving a problem by working on your understanding of the conversation without offering advice. When your teenager (or spouse or younger child) talks to you, prepare yourself to “listen to understand” by taking 2 deep breaths before you speak. This will slow you down and give you time to think before you react. Remind yourself not to jump to conclusions, but instead, put yourself in their shoes and really try to understand what it must feel like to be in their situation. Keep practicing. You’ve got this!