

Preface

IF YOU'RE AN ADULT OVER THIRTY, teenagers probably don't confide much in you. Whether you're a parent or you play another role in an adolescent's life—as neighbor, relative, coach, or boss—you may not experience many long, rich conversations in which teenagers risk talking about their ideas and dreams, compliments and complaints, ambitions and worries.

Dialogues like that don't happen for a lot of reasons. For one thing, parents and teenagers don't spend much time together these days, with work, school, and the other obligations filling our days. For another, young people and adults don't tend to hang out together socially, and without a comfortable way to break in, they rarely have the chance to start a conversation that leads to new understanding, respect, or insights. And when young people interact with adults on the job, their workplaces typically don't encourage meaningful relationships with older colleagues or bosses.

But all that doesn't contradict the reality that the teenagers you know do think about you, a lot. They have strong opinions about you. They need and want things from you. They watch you, worry about you, define themselves in relation to you. Often, they don't feel comfortable enough to say the very things they most wish they could tell you. But they do talk about you to each other.

We wrote this book to let you discover what they can't tell you. For example:

Every parent wants their kid to be a big famous doctor that discovers cures and all that, but it's a lot of pressure, even if you don't realize it. If your mom says, "You're going to be great, you're going to do wondrous things," you're like, "Well, what if I don't? Do you not want me anymore?" – RANDY

A growing process for any teenager is to ask questions, and you learn that way. But a lot of adults don't see it from that perspective. They think you're being disrespectful or defiant, which isn't true. — COTNELL

When my mother's not listening to me, all she does is nod her head, give a little smirk or something. And I'm like, "Yeah you're not listening, so I'm not listening to you." If my mom was listening, her face would show it all. Her face would show that she's interested, and she's actually paying attention to what I'm saying. — BLAKE

The distance you lay between you and your child now is hard to get rid of later. If you sit there and try to enforce everything you think is right, you're just going to push them away. They're not going to take it, they're not going to absorb it, they're just going to back away very slowly. — LIZZ

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As you read this book, we imagine, you might use it to start a conversation with a teenager you know. It's often easier to empathize with an adolescent's point of view, for one thing, if you aren't caught up in worries about control. So parents may feel more comfortable talking about issues that cause tension when the situation under discussion involves another teenager, not their own.

This book may also help you recognize the little things that irritate all teenagers, not just yours, about the older generation. All kids hate being compared to others, for example, though it's a common habit of adults during the high school years. Just remembering that can make a big difference in your everyday relationships with young people.

Reading what teenagers say here may also remind you of the things your kids appreciate and admire about you—even though you may never hear about them directly. Whenever you persist in the face of hardship or make a generous

gesture to someone who needs help, you can be sure some young person is noticing, with lasting effects on their development. It can help to remember that fact, during a time when your teenager's main task is separating from you, not offering you support.

And your own children aren't the only ones you influence, as the contributors to this book make clear. Your small interactions with other teenagers—nieces and nephews, the neighbor's kids, the babysitter, student interns, and the friends your son or daughter brings home—can have enduring positive effects on their behavior and their futures.

This isn't an ordinary advice book. Its experts are teenagers themselves, and they have the perspectives of youth, not of psychologists or social workers. You will find plenty of opinions in these pages that a reasonable adult will rightly take issue with.

But this book is not about what you should decide to do. We hope only to help you hear and respect what teenagers are saying and thinking, on familiar subjects that confront us all, about which we absolutely must communicate if we are to understand each other. So if, for whatever reason, the teenagers you care about can't tell you themselves, the sixty young people who speak in these pages will give you a way to start listening.

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