

## Resource Article

# Communicating with Children and Teens

Janette Pepall

You already know that you have an important role in the lives of your students. Often that role begins with being willing to listen to their stories. By carefully listening, you can learn their thoughts and feelings, their needs, and their hopes. By watching their actions and expressions, you will add to what you know about them.

### **Why Don't Adults Listen to Children and Teens?**

Sadly, some adults think children and teens have nothing to contribute. Children seem young and unimportant, so why listen to them? Teens do not understand the difficulties of adulthood, so what do they have to contribute? Young people have no power in their families, communities, or society. Their opinions may seem to have little value. But this way of thinking is wrong.

Children and teens in crisis situations often have difficulty communicating what has happened to them and what they are feeling. Challenges in their relationships with adults may make them reluctant or unable to share. Many adults, including those who teach at-risk children, struggle with their own communication difficulties. Many teachers do not understand the importance of careful listening. They may not know how to manage the problems their students share. They may feel that they are too busy to take the time to listen. But listening to at-risk children and teens is an important part of their healing.

### **Why Should We Listen?**

Jesus paid attention to children. They are important to Him. They must be important to us. When we listen to children and teens, we give them worth and value. Their perspectives are often creative and insightful. What they say can often help us to help them!

Most children want to talk about their lives. When it is time to make decisions about their lives, they should be allowed to voice their opinions.

### **How Can We Listen?**

There are many ways to listen to students. "Formal listening" means using a questionnaire and recording the students' answers. But valuable listening also takes place in more informal ways, such as gathering a small group of children to talk about a topic or engaging in short conversations with 1 student at a time. These types of conversations are usually the most helpful.

## Why Do Some Young People Find It Difficult to Communicate?

If students seem hesitant about sharing or have difficulty finding the right words, we often assume that they do not want to talk to us. But that may not be true. Many of your students may have difficulty expressing themselves. They may be traumatized by their past. They may not trust adults. They may think that talking about their problems is a betrayal of their family. Sharing personal experiences may cause guilt, shame, and anger.

You may feel that you do not have enough skill to help in your students' healing process. You may not know exactly what they are feeling. You may fear that your students will behave negatively. But God has called you to this important job. Listening and encouraging a student to communicate is part of God's assignment for you.

At-risk young people may take weeks or even months to completely share their stories. We need patience. We need to allow them to share at their own pace, and in small amounts. They see each part of their story as precious. They are watching to see if they can trust us before they tell us more.

## Encouraging Good Communication

It may take time for your students to share their emotions and experiences with you. They need to share at their own pace, sometimes in small amounts. They may be watching to see if they can trust you before they share. Be patient and do what you can to encourage them to share. Here are some ideas:

- Writing stories, acting in a dramas, doing art, playing games, and enjoying unstructured play time are all communication tools. Watch and "listen" to what children and teens are telling you through these activities.
- Set a goal to have a few minutes of individual conversation with each student. Showing interest in them and their lives with encourage them to share.
- Use a calm and friendly tone of voice and look interested. Make eye contact, if that is appropriate in your culture.
- Respond to the students' words and body language.
- Sit on the same level as the student. Do not stand over her, which can be intimidating.
- Check what you have heard to be sure it is what the student means. You might say, "If I hear you right, you are saying that you are afraid that your father will continue to hurt your mother and you?"
- Use language that the student understands.
- Do not be afraid of silence. Allow the student to have time to think.

Children and teens feel valued when adults listen to them. It helps them to believe that the adult who is listening to them truly understand and cares. It is also an important part of helping them to overcome their past and current difficulties. Listening lays the foundation for healing.