

Can Your Child Really Talk to You

Love has tremendous power to pull down invisible walls.

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It's as though there's a wall there," one mother said. "When my daughter was younger it was easy. We talked regularly and openly. But as she got older, this wall went up." She shook her head, "Why won't she talk to me anymore?"

This mother is not alone in her frustration. Many parents know about walls children sometimes build around themselves. They seem high and impenetrable.

The Berlin Wall was high, covered with barbed wire, and plastered with Keep Out signs. It was built to keep people isolated. On my desk is a small chunk of that wall - a piece of cement with an inch-long piece of barbed wire. The cement has some fading colors on one side. It may seem a strange choice for a desktop decoration, but it serves as a reminder of high and formidable walls built to keep people away.

Sometimes children build invisible walls around themselves for similar reasons. They may build them for protection, or perhaps because of feelings of insecurity, distrust, fear, or misunderstanding. How can parents most effectively penetrate such barriers? How do we talk to children who don't particularly want to talk to us? How do we make ourselves into the kind of people our children will open up to?

We must find a way to remove the obstacle. We can look over the wall, or find a loose brick to let us through, or dismantle it entirely. Although the responsibility for removing obstacles of communication is one shared by both parents and children, this article focuses on what parents can do to help improve communication with their children.

LOOK OVER THE WALL

One mother told me of a time when she came home and found that her seventeen-year-old daughter had packed her belongings and was ready to move out. The mother, her heart aching for her daughter, went to her room and alone knelt in prayer, pleading to know what to do. When she sought out her daughter, negative comments spilled from the young woman. But instead of getting defensive and upset as she usually did, the mother listened for the feelings behind the words and realized that her daughter was really crying out for help. How much pain she must be feeling to be acting like this! she thought. Calmly, the mother said, 'Let's go talk in my room.' Her daughter not only followed, but she smiled. They shared feelings and, for the first time in a long time, they talked like friends. Finally, they returned to the daughter's room and put her things away. This mother had effectively looked beyond the defensive wall and heard the crying on the other side.

Do you love me? Do you care? Am I a priority in your life? Such questions rarely come directly from children, but they do come. Often, the most important part of communication is to hear what isn't being said. Children's emotions and needs are usually expressed in coded messages that we must receive and interpret.

Remember when your child was a baby? He cried, and you didn't know why. You thought, *I wish he could just talk to me and tell me what he wants!* As children get older, they still don't know how to voice needs clearly. They just give off signals, and you have to figure out what they really need. In their own way, they may still be crying-only now, the tears are inside.

Elder Marvin J. Ashton of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles made this comment while speaking at a regional representatives' seminar: 'I hear ... people crying to us when they don't even know they are crying' (4 Oct. 1973). Nonverbal signals such as attention-getting behaviors and extreme or inconsistent conduct are basically cries from behind the wall. Other times the cry is masked in apparently idle talk.

A professional counselor told one mother, 'Suppose your son came home and said, 'I have a friend who is taking drugs.' What would you say to him?' The mother paused for a moment and then said, "I'd probably tell him to find another friend." This mother may have missed an important opportunity with her son. When a child tells you about 'my friend's problem,' there is a possibility that your child is struggling with a similar one. Young people drop hints to test our reactions. If we are hasty, harsh, and judgmental, our children may not want to open up any further. We must look over the wall and hear the cry.

FIND THE LOOSE BRICK

Rand Packer wrote, 'Having laid a few brick walls in my time, I have discovered that every wall has a weakness, a brick that is loose ... My dad had taught me long ago that part of working with young men is discovering the flaws in their armor, the weaknesses in their walls, and then to tap away at them until you gain entrance to their lives' (*Congratulations-Its a Dad*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, p. 2). When working with a child who has built a wall around himself, we must find the loose brick-the one interest, dream, or ability that will let us penetrate the wall. A brick may be motorcycles, sports, food, computers, horses, guitars, skateboards, or even journal writing.

One young man from New York attended a youth program at Brigham Young University. At first the boy kept to himself. His counselor, a returned missionary, was concerned and told the program director, 'He just stays in his room and writes in his journal.' Was this the loose brick the director needed?

That evening at dinner, the director purposely sat by the young man in the cafeteria. He began a normal conversation and then changed the subject to journals. The director said, 'People don't usually believe me when I say it, but one of my favorite things to do is to write in my journal. I've already filled several volumes.'

'Really?'" The boy's face lit up. 'I write in my journal too. I think it's important.' That was a turning point. The young man began to come to activities and to interact with others. Before the program ended, he had found many new friends. It all started when someone showed a little interest in his big interest.

A seminary teacher spoke at the mission farewell of a former student. The young man looked fine in his new suit. His shoes were polished. His hair had been cut just the day before. He was smiling confidently and bore a beautiful testimony of the Savior's love. His parents knew that the boy's lifestyle hadn't always been as polished as the shoes and as neat as the hair. He was never a bad kid. He hadn't done anything terribly wrong. But the boy had withdrawn from everyone. It seemed as if no one could reach him. Then the teacher had come into his life and finally got through the wall.

Later, the parents asked the teacher how he had successfully reached this young man who had managed to distance himself so completely from everyone else. Had he shared a special story or testimony? Had he carried on long and in-depth talks with the boy? The teacher only smiled and said, 'You'll never believe it, but one day I found out your boy likes the reruns of the same old TV show I like. Your son would come up to me after class to discuss the show. He would bring me magazine clippings about how much some of the old props and costumes were being auctioned for and where all those old actors are now.' The teacher had stumbled upon the loose brick. Then he worked at it until he opened a space in the wall of isolation around the young man.

President Lorenzo Snow once counseled a group of departing missionaries, 'There is a way to reach every human heart, and it is your business to find the way to the hearts of those to whom you are called (to serve]' ('Instructions to Missionaries,' *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1899, p. 128). A mother approached me about this idea and said, 'But there is no way to reach my daughter. She simply does not have any loose bricks-a few loose screws maybe, but no loose bricks.'

'Sure she does,' I assured her. 'What does she talk about or bring up in conversation?'

'Nothing.'

'What does she do in her free time if she has her own free choice?'

'Nothing. She just goes to school and works.'

'Then what does she do with the money she earns?'

'She buys lots of clothes,' the mother answered.

I smiled at her, 'Guess what you just found.'" Once we locate that loose brick, it may be just a matter of spending the time required to push and pull at it until we break through the wall.

DISMANTLE THE WALL

Effective communication may help to completely dismantle the walls children build around themselves. Three essential elements of open communication are love, trust, and respect.

Love. One young man writes, 'I wish my dad would hug me more and show affection to me when something's wrong or if I'm having a bad day. He used to when I was growing up and it was a good feeling. It's not that I doubt my father's love, it's just that sometimes I need him to tell me he cares for me no matter what I'm doing. I don't feel a lot of love inside of me right now.'

Perhaps the reason some parents have difficulty talking with children is the way love is communicated. We tend to take on more of a 'boss' role. We exercise authority over them, demand accountability, and then, if they comply and put together a good enough track record, we finally convey our approval and love. That is not how God approaches us as his children.

Our caring and love must be constant-given first, and given freely, through good and bad, transgression or testimony, brilliant success or utter failure. Regardless of their choices, children need our non-judgmental love.

One young man finally gathered the courage to go to his bishop and confess several sins from his past. At the end of the interview, the young man said, 'I feel embarrassed about unloading all this on you. What do you think of me?'

Without a pause the bishop said, 'I love you for it. There isn't anything you could share with me that would cause me to love you less.' The young man and his bishop not only enjoyed open communication afterward but also a deep friendship from that time forward.

Elder Gene R. Cook of the Seventy wrote: "Love ... has tremendous power... I don't know anything any greater than to throw your arms around your children every day. At the end of our family prayers ... we throw our arms around every one of them physically. We grab them tight and whisper, 'I love you.'" ("Teaching by the Spirit," unpublished Church Educational System address, 30 June 1989, p. 10).

Trust. Trust is also important in communication. One parent asked, 'How can I trust my child? He is totally untrustworthy.' The truth of the matter is, we don't have a choice. We can't follow children around the rest of their lives. In God's eyes are we, as adults, always totally trustworthy? Yet, Heavenly Father trusts us with many things, including his restored gospel. Perhaps he is giving us something to live up to-focusing on our potential as his children and not on our current problems. Our children need the same message from us.

Trusting relationships can be established by allowing for some freedom and by keeping confidences. Another way to gain trust is to compliment young people.

Too often, parents take the clumsy position of blocking the very communication doors we want our children to enter. Children may put up with put-downs, but no one appreciates cut-lows. They may laugh and play along, but deep down it hurts. Children remember and replay hurtful comments to themselves for years.

Respect. Showing respect for young people allows for open communication. In one Relief Society lesson, the teacher expressed the anxiety she and her husband had felt several years earlier. The stake president had approached them and asked if, since they had a spacious home very close to the chapel, they would mind hosting a luncheon for visiting General Authorities during stake conference. They gladly agreed. The stake president then informed them that one of the authorities who would be coming was the President of the Church!

The teacher explained how she and her husband planned the menu, cleaned the entire house, and set out their best china. After all, the President of the Church was coming to visit their home, and they wanted to show proper respect.

On the morning of the anticipated stake conference, they were putting the final touches on everything. Their teenage son came downstairs for breakfast. He ate some cereal and then, knowing it was a special day, cleaned up after himself. He even rinsed the bowl ... but left it in the sink-

The sister teaching Relief Society said, 'Men I went to the kitchen and saw that bowl in the sink, I exploded. I yelled at my son and gave him a talking-to he would not soon forget.' The bowl was hidden. The family left to attend stake conference.

Through the whole meeting, the mother kept looking at her son sitting there on the chapel bench. She knew she had overreacted, and she felt guilty. She said to her Relief Society class, 'I realized that while trying so hard to show respect to the special man who would visit my home later that day, I had-failed to show respect for another special man who lives there every day. Didn't my son deserve the same respect I was extending to the President of the Church?'

She reached across her younger children, tapped her son on his shoulder, and mouthed the words, 'I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?'

The quality of our communication with our children will improve in direct proportion to the amount of respect we show them when we talk together.

Dismantling invisible walls takes effort and daily individual attention toward each of our children. Walls must not become an accepted part of any child's life. Whether we look over those walls, find and pull out the loose bricks, or pull down the barriers completely, we need to find a way to reach the person behind them.

I look often at the piece of the Berlin Wall on my desktop. I keep it there to remind myself that even the highest walls can come tumbling down. M Brad Wilcox serves as a Primary teacher in the Grandview Ninth Ward, Provo Utah Grandview Stake.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT. This article may prove a basis for discussion between parents and children.
1. What special interests do members of our family have that might provide increased opportunities for communication between us and our children?
2. Do our children have specific Suggestions about how we can be more accessible to them?
3. What Principles of, the gospel will help us prevent or overcome barriers to family communication?

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