



# HOW TO TALK TO ANY YOUNG PERSON

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*an intergenerational conversation toolkit*

A RESOURCE OF THE FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

## FULLER YOUTH INSTITUTE

How to Talk to Any Young Person  
An Intergenerational Conversation Toolkit

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# WHAT EVERY GOOD CONVERSATIONALIST KNOWS

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## A QUICK PRIMER ON EFFECTIVE CONVERSATION

*Conversation has become a lost art. As a culture, we are often too distracted, too busy, or too self-focused to facilitate an engaging and meaningful dialogue. But this can change; we all have the ability to become better conversationalists.*

*Below are a few reminders that can be especially important when starting a conversation with someone you don't know very well.*

### Choose the right location.

The real estate adage of "location, location, location" also holds true with intergenerational conversations. Often we sabotage the conversation before it starts by selecting a location that is hectic, distracting, or full of interruptions. When possible, find a location that is quiet and will help both you and others focus. If food or snacks are involved, all the better.

### Listen with your heart.

Listening is a practiced skill. Most of us do not listen well, even in one-on-one conversations. Instead of listening carefully to the words that are being said, we are planning what we're going to say next. When we're first getting to know someone, it is easy to fall into this trap. Remind yourself to pay full attention to the content as well as the delivery. What are they communicating in words? What are they saying with their tone and body language?

## Repeat what they've said.

This may sound strange, but it's an important practice in active listening. Repeating what someone has told you demonstrates appreciation, support, and attention. Here's an example: A ninth-grader tells you that she just got home from a faraway tennis tournament. You say, "Oh, you just got home. From a tennis tournament! How long have you been playing?" Repeating the details of their story shows that you care to hear more, and makes it easier to frame your next question.

## Ask follow-up questions.

People generally love to talk about themselves—regardless of age. So the best way to fan the flame of conversation is to ask someone to tell you more.

Much of the time, a follow-up question can begin with something like, "Tell me more about ..." or, "Why do you think that is?" or, "How did that come to be?" These questions invite longer, detailed answers rather than the dreaded monosyllabic response.

## Avoid a monologue.

Sure, the young people around you probably appreciate your advice and stories. But be sure to balance the conversation with questions so that your voice is not droning on endlessly. Some people feel the need to fill in every silence; don't allow the silence to make you uneasy. Instead, give your conversation partner an extra moment to respond.

## Fuel a positive atmosphere.

Remember that conversations are a two-way street, and that you have as much power to set the tone as your conversation partner does. So set a positive tone by smiling, relaxing your body, and maintaining eye contact. Avoid checking your cell phone (if at all possible).

You can also affirm your conversation partner with kind words as they're telling you their story. When they receive that positive feedback, they will feel encouraged to say more.

### Have a single conversation.

If you're in a group setting—perhaps a pool party or meal where you've gathered several young people—ask everyone to participate in a single conversation. Propose a topic by asking a question, and give everyone an opportunity to respond. What often happens in groups is that conversations are broken into smaller groups; anyone who is not actively engaged looks at their phone. To avoid this, invite everyone into the one conversation at the table—the conversation they're having with you and with each other.

# GROWING IN EMPATHY

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## AN EXPLORATION

It may feel like it's been ages since you were a young person. Even if your twenties were not too long ago, our world is changing rapidly. The acceleration is astounding.

So what might it look like to dive deep into conversation with today's young people? These exercises are designed to help you discover that difference does not have to mean distance in our ability to relate and create understanding. Consider the following questions on your own in preparation for a conversation with a young person, or perhaps after a mystifying conversation that left you wondering about young people's journey today.

1. What was it like to be a young person yourself? What memories do you have of your late teens and twenties? What victories did you enjoy? What challenges did you endure?

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2. Then and now: what do you think young people face today that you did not face as a young person? Here are a few examples: the prevalence of electronics; the vast and instantaneous dissemination of information and media of all kinds; the lower likelihood of finding job security; the rising cost of living in most cities; the later age for getting married and starting a family.

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3. Think of a young person you care about. What do you love about them? What fears do you have for them as they're walking through this season of life?

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4. What is an active step you might take to advocate for a young person you love? For his/her peers?

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5. Emerging adulthood is a period during which young people wrestle with questions of belief, work, and love. How do you imagine finding answers to these questions is different now than it has been in the past? How do you think it may be the same? How have you gained wisdom in these areas, and what is one insight you might share with young people in your life?

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## CONVERSATION TOPICS

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### QUESTIONS TO ASK, EXPERIENCES TO SHARE

Below is a list of possible questions to use when talking with young people. Please don't try to use them all in one conversation! Practice a few that you want to remember to ask in an upcoming dialogue with a teenager or emerging adult.

These categories are generally appropriate to bring up with almost anyone—and while you do, don't forget to share your own story. Think about how you would feel if someone asked you these questions. What would they invite you to say or share? Listen for those answers. And remember to ask follow up questions (when in doubt, "Tell me more ..." is a great option).

#### Home and Family:

- Where did you grow up?
- What did you like about growing up there?
- How do you think growing up there has shaped who you are?
- Do you have siblings? What was your experience with siblings growing up? What are your relationships like now?
- How often do you visit home?
- What's your relationship with your parents like?
- When was the last time you had a great conversation with your parents? What made it so great?
- What are some of your favorite family memories?

## Daily Life:

- What are you up to this week / weekend?
- How is your day going?
- How are you spending your weekend / break / summer?"
- What do you like to do in your free time?
- What do your friends like to do in their free time?
- How is it going with your job / school / current occupation?  
What do you like and dislike about it?
- What's challenging you most these days?

## Community and Church:

- How do you like it here in this city?
- What do you like to do around town?
- What are your favorite restaurants / cafes / shops / parks / museums?
- Do you think you'll stay here for a while? Where else would you like to live?
- How long have you been attending our church? How did you find it?
- What do you like most about being part of our church?
- What's it been like to try to connect with others at our church?
- Are there particular ministries or programs at our church that are intriguing to you?
- What do you think our church could do better? How do you wish our church was different?

## **Journey and Spirituality:**

- What are some things you hope to accomplish this year / season / month?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What are your hopes for your time here (city, school, church, or job)?
- Where or when do you feel closest to God?
- What are some of the challenges you've faced this year (in city, school, church, relationships, or job)? How have those challenges impacted you?
- How are you different than you were a year or two ago?
- Where do you see God working in your life right now?
- If you could ask God any question, what would it be?
- What are you learning right now? What do you hope to learn in the next year?

## Bonus #1

# HOW TO TALK TO BOYS

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## AND GET THEM TO TALK BACK: 7 TIPS YOU CAN USE THIS WEEK

As much as we are not huge proponents of overfocusing on gender differences, there is no escaping the social reality of boys. Learning about the structure of boy world (or refreshing ourselves, for those of us who were once boys) gives us a bit more of a compass for having meaningful conversations with the boys we care about.

That's where Rosalind Wiseman comes in. Wiseman not only parents two boys, but also has researched boy world on the ground through her cadre of over 200 middle school and high school advisors (plus a slate of parents). Their collective input delivers an impressive look into the ins and outs of boys' actual reality in social contexts in her recent book *Masterminds & Wingmen: Helping our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of Boy World*. Worth the price of the book alone is Wiseman's description of the "Act-Like-A-Man Box" that most guys eventually resign themselves to inhabit.

### Below are seven insights for communicating effectively with adolescent boys:

- 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.

For more wisdom on leading and parenting adolescent boys, visit [fulleryouthinstitute.org](http://fulleryouthinstitute.org) and search "boys."

See 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).

## Bonus #2

# HOW TO TALK TO GIRLS

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### SIX TIPS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH TEENAGE GIRLS

Adolescent girls—like boys—get wrapped up in the work of parting from childhood and moving toward adulthood. This is good, important, even necessary work. But for parents and other caring adults, it can feel painful, especially when it comes to communicating with girls. Your once open, easy conversation partner can transform overnight into a closed door of silence.

The good news is that we don't need to accept these transitions as relational dead ends. Girls need us more than ever in these years; they just need us in different ways and on different terms—their terms.

Psychologist Lisa Damour works daily with adolescent girls in both private practice and school-based settings. She has compiled her years of wisdom, experience, and research into a volume titled *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls Through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*. This manual serves as a valuable resource for parents, leaders, teachers, and anyone else who is helping a young woman through the journey from childhood to adulthood.

**When it comes to our conversations with teenage girls, here are a handful of helpful tips you can use in your next few interactions.**

- 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 suggests. Pick your moments rather than making every discussion a battle; the pushback may only be because the conversation is based on your timing and your turf. 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 internalized from a friend. As a caring adult, one skill we can teach girls is to utilize 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 some 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 girls' relationships with peers and, eventually, families of their own.

These six strategies are just a starting point, but hopefully they can take you a few steps deeper in your conversations with girls who are growing into young women.

*For more wisdom on leading and parenting adolescent girls, visit [fulleryouthinstitute.org](http://fulleryouthinstitute.org) and search "girls."*

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