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How to keep the cat from getting your preteen's tongue

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Although most parents are prepared for the Terrible 2s, many are caught off guard by the Trying 10s.

"I always tease that you're in trouble when they hit the double digits," says Donna Segreti, a Chicago mother of three daughters, ages 13 to 21. "It used to be age 13 when I was growing up, but now when kids hit 10, their bodies start changing and their feelings start changing and they're not sure what's happening."

Middle-school-age children, or preteens, often seem to cross an invisible line, moving from a relatively easygoing childhood connection with their parents to a seemingly alien place where they're as likely to talk out concerns with Mom and Dad as to play Mozart CDs at a low volume.

"Between ages 8 and 10, children think their parents are gods, and their friends are friends of convenience — kids next-door or in the same classroom,"

says Lawrence Kutner, a psychiatry instructor at Harvard Medical School, columnist for Parents magazine and author of parenting books, including "Your School-Age Child" (Avon, \$11).

"At around age 10 or 11, all that changes. Children then choose friends who share their values and view of the world, and they see their parents as having feet of clay."

Despite their growing independence, preteens still have a strong need for parental attention. Many experts agree with Jose Barillas, principal of Thurgood Marshall Middle School in Chicago, who says, "The parent-child connection during these years is crucial to a child's development. It sets the stage for adolescent communication patterns."

Yet according to a recent Philips Consumer Communications survey of 5th to 8th graders and their parents, most parents and their preteen children spend less than an hour a day talking to each other, and many less than a half-hour.

How can parents keep the communication lines up and running with their 10- to 13-year-olds, espe-

cially when these preadolescents seem to be speaking a separate language, and most certainly are sporting a new attitude?

Kutner suggests five key communication guidelines for parents: Make the time; listen to the little stuff; listen between the lines; ask your child's opinion, and don't interrupt.

"Take the time to have a relationship with your child," agrees Antoinette Saunders, a children's clinical psychologist and author of "The Stressproof Child" (Henry Holt, \$13.95). "Let the housework wait and take a walk together or just sit down in a quiet room and give your children a chance to be with you. You can't expect someone you don't know to share their intimate thoughts with you."

"Today's parents often have to come up with creative ways to be together so there's an opportunity for conversation," says Marion Payne, president of the National Middle School Association and principal of Mt. View Middle School in Marriottsville, Md. "It's been said that the most revolutionary appliance

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ever invented was the dishwasher because it took away the time when several family members would be doing something together."

In our fast-forwarded world, how can families find new, relaxed means of togetherness so talk flows naturally between children and their parents?

"Kids are not adults. They're not into the mode of sitting in chairs and talking to you," says Dr. Eugene Beresin, associate pro-

fessor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of child and adolescent psychiatry residency training at Massachusetts General Hospital and McLean Hospital. "Instead, talk over a game of Scrabble or cards. Shoot hoops together, and in between shots say, 'So how's it going with you and so and so?' Or if your kid is watching MTV, sit down and watch with him, and let the kid talk about his world."

In fact, listening is probably the single most important thing a parent can do, according to many veterans of the middle school years.

"What I hear all the time from

kids is, 'Why doesn't anybody listen to me?'" Payne says. "I recommend carpooling to parents — just turn the radio to moderate volume and listen to your child and his or her friends to get an idea of what the conversation is. You don't need to participate then, but follow up later and ask your child, 'I'm curious what you think about this or that.' And then share your opinion, but don't lecture."

"We parents tend to interrupt and get loud, and this keeps kids from opening up," Segreti adds. "With kids this age, we need to listen and not judge if we want to

keep the lines open."

"Parents need to understand that communicating is not about imposing one's beliefs," Beresin says. "Instead, if the parent accurately reflects back what the child expresses both verbally and non-verbally, the child feels valued, respected and understood."

"For example, if a child isn't invited to a party, it's often too easy for the parent to jump in and give advice. What can be more helpful is to simply empathize, saying, 'Tell me about it' or 'How did that make you feel?' If a kid thinks you got it, she's more willing to open up."

"The biggest concern at this age is trying to fit in," says a Glencoe mother of two daughters, ages 10 and 12. "I've told my girls it's better to have one friend you can count on and that even though it's harder not to be popular, you learn more about yourself. My older daughter said, 'I'd just like to know what it would be like to be popular for one day.' At this age, the world around them, especially the social part, becomes the most important thing."

Some topics are more difficult to talk about than others.

"When something bad happens, if a child's friend is diagnosed

with cancer, for example," Kutner says, "if you go to your 13-year-old and say, 'Do you want to talk about it?' he'll say 'no' because such a direct approach is too threatening. However, if you have a younger child, ask the 13-year-old to help you explain what's happened. This way, the 13-year-old saves face but is able to talk about the situation."

"Another approach is to go in the kitchen, where most kids this age hang out, and call a friend — or the recorded weather message — and talk about the subject. As you do so, you give your children the language they need to talk about the issue."

Reading the same book is one approach Saunders recommends to open up discussion in a non-threatening way.

"It really impresses children when you want to read their book — it's almost as good as listening to their music," Saunders says. "Preadolescence is an important time to work on a relationship, and parallel reading is a great way to do that."

At the same time, it is important for parents to respect their children's privacy at this age.

"It's not right to force a child to talk if she's not ready, unless it's a major crisis, like cutting school," Beresin says. "Kids need to have secrets."

"The middle grades are an age of testing," Payne agrees. "For example, many children close the door to their room for the first time. Sometimes parents are offended, but it's a natural piece of preadolescent development, part of testing their independence."

Sometimes communication problems simply stem from a child's overtiredness.

"Children at this age often have exhausting schedules," Saunders says. "They go from a sleep-over directly to an early-morning soccer game so that by 4 p.m. they're too tired to cooperate. If a parent is having a harder time communicating, first make sure your child is eating right and getting enough sleep before you assume it's something else."

Different children have different reasons for not communicating on demand. "Some children are more sensitive and need an environment where it's safe to share," Saunders says. "So know your child."

And admit your mistakes, Kutner and others advise.

"We don't apologize enough to our kids," Kutner says. "It's important to model the behavior we want from them. If we model an attitude that we're always right, they will too. But they'll feel much closer to you if you admit mistakes sometimes."

On the other hand, Kutner says, parents should not abdicate their authority. Although they should explain their rationale for decisions that affect their preteens, they don't have to persuade the children that they are right, he writes in "Making Sense of Your Teenager" (Avon, \$11). "Although she may seem peeved, your child actually finds this clear role definition reassuring," he says.

At this stage of their development, children are discovering the values that matter to them.

"What's unique about children in the middle or grade school years is their interest in rules and regulations," says Dr. Jonathan Bloomberg, chairman of the department of psychiatry at Rockford Memorial Hospital and assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Illinois School of Medicine. "Fifth and 6th graders will spend most of their recess time figuring out the rules of a kickball game, leaving little time for the game itself."

"Children at this age want to see the logic in our point of view and they deserve an explanation for our rules, not just, 'Do this because I say so.' Preteens also have the capacity to reason now, and it's important for parents to hear them out. This kind of give and take builds trust."

"Children need to know they can talk to their parents about problems, and the preteen years are a critical time to discuss issues such as drugs and issues related to sex. You don't want to have those initial conversations in adolescence because they will be very hard if you haven't laid the groundwork in 5th and 6th grade."

What is one behavior change a parent could make today to improve parent-child communication?

"When you're talking to your kids, really be there," Kutner suggests. "Don't be reading the paper and glance up and say, 'So how's school?' They'll see the indifference. Instead, be emotionally present as well as physically present."

Kutner's booklet, "Let's Connect: A Guide to Better Family Communication," provides questions and tips aimed at improving discussions between middle school-age children and their parents. For a free copy, send a stamped return envelope to: Philips "Let's Connect" Family Communication Guide, P.O. Box 7615, Melville, NY 11775-7615 or read the tips on-line at www.philipsconsumer.com/letsconnect.