

# can you hear me now?



How to avoid a communication breakdown with your kids by Tamekia Reece

**M**MARY ELLEN AMTOWER WAS AMAZED WHEN her daughter told her she'd turned down a date with a boy she liked because he had a friend ask rather than asking himself. "I thought it showed marvelous maturity and I wanted to share that," says Mary Ellen, who lives in Highland, Maryland. So later that night Mary Ellen filled in her husband, who caught a glimpse of their daughter rushing upstairs, visibly upset. She'd overheard. "She wrote me a note saying she thought it was just between us and she seriously doubted if she could ever trust me again," says Mary Ellen.

It can be tough getting adolescents to open up, and while it's often just the natural order of things—after all, a need for privacy comes with the territory—sometimes it's parents who break down the lines of communication. Just ask Mary Ellen. She made a classic parental mistake: betraying her daughter's trust. Chances are, you've tripped up too. It's tricky navigating such communication minefields, but if you can figure out how to do it, you'll clear the way for meaningful conversations with your kids.

## mistake #1 "I can't keep this to myself."

If your child has to worry about you sharing what she says (or does) with others, you can bet she won't be talking to you about much. She may hide what's going on in her life—no matter how innocent it is.

"Sharing parenting stresses with a friend or your sister is fine," says Daniel Buccino, a licensed clinical social worker at Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center in Baltimore. Every parent needs a support system. "But it's not a good idea to blab *everything* your child does or says," he adds—especially not in front of her. Kids need to know that they can confide in you.

What's OK to reveal and what's not? If it's about sex, dating, body issues or anything else that might embarrass your child, keep it to yourself, advises Buccino. If it's less serious, get her OK to chat with Aunt Kathy about it. Already spilled the beans? Then apologize. "Acknowledge that you've said too much and realize that you've hurt her," says Buccino. *(Please turn to 36)*



## CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

CONTINUED “Vow to earn back her trust by being more discreet.” Then keep your lips zipped.

### mistake #2 “I think you should...”

“William asked me to be his girlfriend.” As soon as Nettie Hartsock heard those words from her 12-year-old, she started lecturing. “I panicked,” says Nettie, who lives in San Marcos, Texas. “I wanted her to see that she could worry about boys later.” It turns out her daughter agreed. “After I lectured for 15 minutes, she was able to finish,” says Nettie. “She’d told the boy she was too young.”

If Nettie had listened first and talked second, she wouldn’t have worked herself into a panic—or sent a message of mistrust to her daughter. “The main mistake parents make is not shutting up when they should,” says Anthony E. Wolf, PhD, author of *Get Out of My Life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?: A Parent’s Guide to the New Teenager*. “It’s normal to want to turn what your kid says into a teaching moment.” The problem is, it kills what might be an in-depth discussion and discourages

kids from talking about meaningful things in the future.

“We all have a need to just vent, even kids,” says Vicki Panaccione, PhD, a clinical child psychologist in Melbourne, Florida. “When you jump in with advice, you send negative unspoken messages, like *I don’t have confidence in your ability to handle this yourself*,” she says.

Kids simply want you to listen, says Dr. Panaccione. They’ll let you know what else they need, whether it’s advice or merely an ear, through their words and behavior.

### mistake #3 “Not now, honey.”

In addition to working full-time, Kelly Fritz Garrow, a Wauseon, Ohio, mom of two teens, is also completing a graduate program. It’s no wonder she’s always busy.

“Recently, a sign my daughter made and posted on a friend’s locker was ripped down. She interrupted me during my homework to talk about it,” says Kelly, who didn’t pay much attention.

Incidents like this one don’t surprise Dr. Panaccione. “That’s probably the biggest lament I hear from kids: ‘My parents don’t have time,’” she says. “While we can’t

always stop what we’re doing the moment our child wants to talk, saying, ‘Not now, I’m busy,’ sends the message that he or she is low on our priority list.” Eventually your kids will stop coming to you at all.

Saying “Let’s talk about it later” is fine; just make sure you follow through. “One-on-one time with your child is vital,” says Dr. Wolf. It doesn’t have to be very long, he adds, but it does need to happen. And if your child ever seems especially stressed or angry, drop everything and give her your full attention, says Dr. Panaccione.

### mistake #4 “You did what?”

When Silvana Clark’s daughter said her college choice was the one her ex-boyfriend attended, Silvana flipped. “I said it was stupid to base her college pick on a boy,” says Silvana, who lives in Bellingham, Washington. The more Silvana yelled, the less her daughter said.

When your child does or says something you don’t agree with, it’s easy to blow up, but the last thing you want to do is react in a way that will discourage her from sharing. “In their heart of hearts, kids don’t want to upset their parents,” says Roni Cohen-Sandler, PhD, coauthor of *I’m Not Mad, I Just Hate You!* So if you lose it, she’ll think twice before coming to you again. In fact, she may bottle up her feelings or turn to friends for advice (which is often inaccurate).

If you’re having a touchy talk, it’s OK to take a breather. “When you feel your emotions getting aroused, tell your child, ‘I need to think about that,’ then take a break.”

If you do overreact, all isn’t lost. “Go back later and admit that you didn’t handle it the best way,” says Dr. Wolf. “Tell her what you’d rather have said. Kids know their parents aren’t perfect and admitting it increases your credibility.” **wd**



## text me, mom

Face-to-face conversations are always best, especially the important ones, but if your kids spend more time texting than talking, take advantage of their tech obsession. According to a study by Kelton Research, 53% of teens think text messaging has improved their relationship with their parents. Perhaps it’s because:

- Texting gives kids more space but allows you to keep in touch as often as necessary.
- You get to edit your message before sending, so there’s less chance of saying something you’ll regret.
- Kids are more likely to alert you about things via text than they would if they had to call all the time.