



Introduction

“How do I get my children to talk to me?”

“My kids don’t listen.”

“What in the world is going on with kids today?”

“Is there a time of day that is better or worse try to have a conversation with my teenager?”

Your kids don’t talk to you? I’ve heard that a lot. I have also heard,

“I can’t talk to my parents. Why bother? They never listen. They feel they either have to be imparting wisdom or grilling me about my friends. They supposedly want to know about my life and my problems, but it’s impossible to have a real conversation with them. We never just talk. It’s easier to just say everything is fine.”

What I Wish You Knew Conversations was created with the simple goal of fostering better communication in families by encouraging more frequent “little” conversations so that there might be less need for “big” ones. It is my observation that people we care about can be compared to our pulse. Usually we don’t pay much attention unless something seems wrong.

And then we have to pay a LOT of attention!

Too often it's not until it's too late that we realize how very important it is to be "tuned in" to our kids.

Communicating before problems occur could help prevent a lot of the problems.

From working with adolescents for over 25 years, I know how much they have on their minds. Some have shared stories with me and then asked me to talk to their parents for them. Better they learn how to do that themselves. They have a lot to say and really do want to be heard.

After all the listening to both teens and parents talk about their concerns and interviewing hundreds of teens about things that matter to them, my best advice to parents is to try to get your child to share what's on his mind with you and then listen, listen, listen. But I know it is not easy, especially the getting your child to share part.

Too often what starts out as an opportunity to talk turns into questions that are answered in monosyllables.

“How was school?”

“OK”

There is a lot of talk about the importance of keeping the lines of communication open. But that is so much easier said than done. It's not that we don't want to talk with each other; it's that we don't know how - and we don't know when. Everyone is so busy. We put it off until we find just the right time and that never seems to come. Or, what passes for real communication takes the form of some variation of,

“How was your day?”

“Fine”

“Good”

Read what this high school student had to say when asked about the frequent use of the word, FINE.

“There is no day that can honestly be described as fine. 'Fine' is usually delivered with the misleading teenage tone of voice that covers uncertainties and insecurities with outrage and anger. The tone of voice that accosts the listener, even in a single word, with the questions, 'Why are you asking me this? Why don't you just leave me alone?' 'Fine' is a mask. 'Fine' hides a C- on a recent physics test, a heart-stopping smile from the cute boy with the locker across the hall and a fight with a friend that feels like the end of the world. Parents and kids may have a lot in common, probably more than either is willing to admit, but growing up today is not the same as it was a generation ago. Our days are a lot more than just FINE.”

How it Began

The idea for What I Wish You Knew Conversations was born from a personal experience. Many years ago when one of my own children was in college at the University of Queensland, my husband and I experienced every parent's nightmare. We received a call telling us that our daughter had been seriously injured in an accident. I was on the next flight to Australia. Fortunately, the injury was not life-threatening, but it did require a prolonged period of bed rest and recuperation. Because the doctors advised against her taking the twenty-hour flight back home right away, the plan was that after her release from the hospital she would return to the University, where she would rest and have physical therapy while she recuperated. I was allowed to stay in one of the empty rooms in her dormitory until she was able to travel.

During that time I had the opportunity to experience something that most mothers don't. For over a month, knowing that my husband was at home taking care of our other two children, I was undistracted by normal demands of home, family, work and other responsibilities. I was living in a girl's dorm on the other side of the world and had the luxury of not having to multi-task, of really being able to live in the moment, to be there for my child and to think. I also had the opportunity to get to know many students.

The kids were kind and helpful and curious and forthright too. After a while, I stopped being a strange phenomenon and they began to accept me. They told me about their "mums" and about other things too. They asked questions and talked about their lives and gave me some advice to pass on to other parents.

One of the things they told me about was a friend who took her own life earlier that year. They told me about her parents who said, "If only we had known what she was going through..." and "If only she had talked to us and confided in us..."

A lot of what the kids shared was their desire to be able to talk more easily with their own parents. Probably because I was not their own mother and because there was a degree of anonymity in talking with me around, they did so easily. I was just like a fly on the wall.

Being respectful of what they had to say and of their privacy, I created www.whatiwishyouknew.com for them to have a safe place to express their thoughts and ideas and opinions. I have had the privilege of communicating with teens from around the world. I have since interviewed hundreds more students in classrooms, in libraries, in a homeless shelter, in youth agencies, and, through an interpreter in a school for the deaf.

In addition, through my work with WorldTeach, I had the opportunity to introduce the What I Wish You Knew Conversations writing project in schools in the Pacific Islands.



Collective Journal

No matter their age or where they live, most teens simply want to be heard and taken seriously. And they want to be able to talk with their parents more easily. They feel that adults don't have any idea of the pressures they have; that they don't appreciate how much times have changed in recent years, and that even the most well-intentioned parents have a lot to learn.

“*Too many parents think, ‘My kid gets good grades, doesn’t do drugs and gets home by curfew so I’m a good parent.’*
WRONG!!”

They shared their honest and heartfelt feelings unselfconsciously and were eager to give advice about what parents would benefit from knowing. All the students interviewed wanted to help adults realize the importance of taking the time to really listen to their children.

“*Sometimes it feels like a daily battle just to survive. We need well-informed adults to tune in. Parents should step away from the articles on parenting and self-help books they’re always reading and start to listen to us, the actual kids.*”

The results of hundreds of interviews that you are about to read have been gathered for over a decade and come from a wide variety of students. Children who are blessed with good health and some who are not, kids in public schools and some in private or special needs schools, teens from cities, suburbs and small communities tell parents and other adults what they think and feel and worry about.

I CREATED THIS BOOK TO GIVE VOICE TO TEENS WHO TOO OFTEN KEEP THEIR FEELINGS TO THEMSELVES.

HOWEVER, ALTHOUGH THEY WANT ADULTS TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT THEIR LIVES, THEY DON'T WANT TO SIT ACROSS THE TABLE FROM THEIR PARENTS AND HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH THEM ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL PROBLEMS.

IT IS A LOT EASIER TO TALK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE AND THEIR PROBLEMS.

Many of the students said that they “would have died” if their parents had read their real diaries. But in this Collective Journal they offer parents, teachers and other adults the gifts of knowing more about their children's lives and hearing them tell us what they want and need.

Although names do not appear, very real kids welcomed the opportunity to write advice or letters to their parents. Not unlike the maids in Kathryn Stockett's “The Help,” the people who shared their feelings here felt more comfortable knowing that they were promised anonymity. Some of the quotes will appear more than once throughout this book. This is not by accident or error, but very purposeful. These were opinions that were shared several times.