Seek First to Understand

Seek first to understand, then to be understood is Habit #5 of Steven Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and one that, when practiced, will fundamentally change and improve family communication. Seek first to understand requires that we step into the shoes of the other person and see the problem or issue from their perspective. In concept, this is easy. In practice it is a little trickier as it means we have to get out of the way enough to see things broader than our own perspective.

Do you wonder how well you’re practicing seek first to understand? Consider this situation and BE THE TEEN: you have just received a progress report indicating that you’re in jeopardy of failing a class: What else is going on in your life that is impacting your “progress?”

What happens for many parents is that we fail to see issues from the teen’s perspective and start to diagnose the problem and determine the solution. Our diagnosis may not be wrong, but we often stop there and do not empathize with what the teen may be feeling or experiencing. When teens feel they are not being listened to, or that parents don’t understand them, they shut down. As the verbatim comment below suggests, our jumping to solution without seeking to understand the problem has caused us to miss some really important information about the health and wellbeing of our kids.

“I wish my parents supported me more. I never talk to my mom about my problems, because she always tells me all the things I am doing wrong and never takes my side. I confide to her, “Mom, I have so much homework and I’m completely stressed out.” She usually says, “Everyone has stress. Stop complaining.” or “This is the real world, so deal with it” or “Why are you so lazy?” Can you imagine if I tried to talk about my worries deep deep down, like my emotional insecurities or paranoia about grades and tests or my frequent thoughts of “Why even bother living? What’s the point?”

Three communication tips that allow us to seek first to understand:

Pause and be present in this situation
This means several things: noticing but not necessarily acting or speaking from a place of emotion; being careful not to cloud this situation with old issues (words like “always” and “never” are clues to muddying the waters), and having a big picture perspective – assess the whole (person, home, schedule) to address the core issue, not just the symptom. In short, give yourself the time and space to respond rather than react.

Be empathic and non-judgmental
The definition of empathy is to identify with another’s feelings, attitudes and thoughts. That doesn’t mean we have to like it, agree with it or allow it, but it does mean we need to hear it from their perspective. Speak to your teen from a place of inquiry and curiosity and when
you do, you’ll learn much more than what their up to, you’ll learn what they think and who they are as a person.

What you say matters (what you do matters even more) – be mindful!
Choose to be connected over being right. Have two-way communication that is honest and open. Teens will talk openly with us when they feel heard, even if we don’t like what we’re hearing.

Communication is at the core of all of our relationships and at the heart of a harmonious and healthy family. When we seek first to understand, we can indeed have our kids understand how much we want the very best for them.