



What We Can't Tell You

Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives

by Kathleen Cushman and the youth of What Kids Can Do

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How much do parents and other adults really know about the adolescents they care about? What do teenagers need from adults—if only they could say so?

Young people themselves offer some compelling answers in the forthcoming book excerpted here: *What We Can't Tell You: Teenagers Talk to the Adults in Their Lives*. Their messages came from Kathleen Cushman's work sessions with 75 youth from metropolitan areas and rural places around the United States—ordinary teenagers who reflect the diversity of this country's families and communities.

Their collaboration with What Kids Can Do was sponsored by MetLife Foundation, part of both organizations' work to make public the voices of youth about their lives and learning. It came about after *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*, another WKCD collaboration sponsored by MetLife Foundation, drew the attention of educators nationwide to the ideas teenagers have for making schools better.

The things differ that each teenager “can't tell you” about their relationships with parents and other adults outside school. But one central reality emerges when teenagers speak openly about their own behavior, emotions, and needs. Without exception, they desire the attention, caring, and support of adults in their lives. And they realize that without it, they cannot do as well at the task of growing into who they want to be. For parents wondering how best to help their teenagers in school, the message may be different from what most expect. Connecting with us matters even more than school, young people say. Far more than we need help with our algebra homework, we crave your support as we navigate our identity and independence.

Through their stories and opinions, the teenagers in *What We Can't Tell You* show us that connecting with adolescents does not depend so much on adults addressing their various problems or setting particular rules. It has more to do with sticking around, with paying attention, with relaxing and letting them have things they “can't tell you.” Sooner or later, as they let us know here, they will get around to saying them.

Family Ties

Regardless of their family situations, teenagers acknowledge their parents as powerful figures, affecting them in ways both positive and negative. They seek a delicate balance with the adults in their lives, looking for affirmation at one moment, and a force to push against at the next. Above all, they want to see that they matter to their family.

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I think of my aunt as a motor, because a lot of things she says and teaches, it gets me moving. Like how I clean up, or how I carry myself, or just how I think is from her, 'cause she drills a lot of things into me and it sticks. But sometimes she can say negative things that stick to me also. I don't think she even notices, but she does. – *Charity*

When my dad said she was going to move in with him, I was really mad. I didn't really know her. Don't make life-changing decisions without consulting your kids. It makes them feel like they don't really matter. – *Justine*

Parents say things they don't mean, and they don't realize how that affects their kids. Even the smallest thing they say like "I don't care." It's like, if your mom doesn't care, who does? – *Camillia*

I just think that everybody needs one person in their life that thinks they're great no matter what. – *Alice*

When they tell me that they love me. When they actually tell me that, you know, like verbally, not just . . . actually telling me, reassuring me. When they defend me and are willing to literally give their life for me. If someone was going to shoot me, my dad is willing to get in front of them. He told me that once, and it made me glad. – *Moses*

I think parents are the glue. It's like you have to be able to ground on something, something you can come back to, and that's what parents are. It's almost like rubber bands, that would be a better metaphor. They let you stretch out, but then they always hang on to you in some way, so you're never flying out in the stratosphere totally off your rocker. – *Sarah*

The Parent Next Door

Everything doesn't depend on parents; most teenagers also connect with adults outside the immediate family. Relatives, friends, neighbors, or even employers can reinforce a parent's contributions, often without the tensions of the parent-child relationship. They can provide alternative perspectives and experiences, too—a way to be different, a means to excel, an outlook that will get them through hard times.

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I can go to her about anything, really, and she's behind me one hundred percent. She'll tell me, "Yes you've made a mistake but now you must get up and walk it off. You have to be able to look through the bad and just go ahead." The only rule she'll tell me is just to think for myself. She'll call to speak to my mother and then she'll ask for me, how am I doing, what am I getting into, and I mean, she's asking because she's really interested. – *D.J.*

My best friend has these really weird parents that are hippies, and they're lawyers. They have their own farm in their back yard and they plant and then harvest, and it's really cool. He's like, "They're so weird!" But I like the weirdness, it's completely different for me, and I always have conversations with them. – *Danny*

He showed me a couple of things and got me interested in architecture, and now, when I go off to college I want to study architecture and engineering. I guess teenagers know everything about computers, so I teach him how to use different software on the computer. He teaches me, I teach him, that's the relationship we have. – *Alex*

We could be working in pouring rain and thunder and she'll always have a positive attitude on. So I would force myself to be like, Okay I'm going to stay out here and deal with it, because someone is staying positive. – *Blake*

I would tell my grandma almost anything, she's such an awesome person and so smart, and really opinionated about things but really open-minded at the same time. I like having her as a fallback for my mom. When I get into a fight with my mom I call my grandma and talk to her about it. – *Lily*

When I go to church there's always a couple of elderly people who are looking out for me. They always ask me what's going on, how's school, how are the grades. They have faith in me, they see something in me, so they want to help me out. – *D.J.*

We're Watching You

Teenagers watch their parents and other adults constantly, whether the adults know it or not. They pick up on everything, not just what the adults intend them to notice—every bit as much as their parents watch and fret about them. As one teenager put it, “Your parents are role models for what you want to be and for what you don’t want to be.”

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When children are young they look at their parents as gods, but by the time they're teenagers, they're looking at their parents as real people. Parents should realize that, while they love you, teenagers at this point have a rough idea of how they think things should be. They judge other people and they look at you and they compare you, and they make their own decisions about why you do certain things. – *Stephanie*

If you see your parents not respecting each other, how are you supposed to ever learn to respect them? If you see one of your parents being always yelled at by the other one, and they have no self-esteem, how are you supposed to learn self-esteem? I mean, they are your examples. – *Sarah*

My friend's mom was at school and saw this special needs kid having a hard time. She talked to him about it, and helped him out. I was thinking that was really cool. And then a few minutes later, she was talking to a teacher about what a big hassle it was. That really made me feel like when people help me, they think it's a really big hassle. – *Tabitha*

Knowing how my mom had the courage to get a divorce from my dad gives me the courage to get myself out of bad relationships. It's scary sometimes, it's painful, but obviously if things are bad you want it to end. We've been through a lot of the same things, even though one is on the scale of dating and one is on the scale of marriage. A lot of the same things come up, like getting harassed a little bit afterwards by the person. – *Alice*

When my grandparents try to hide things from me, and you can see it in their face that something's wrong, it worries me. They're not in the best of health, and to be honest, we're not financially the best. When they sit there and they're like, “Oh yeah everything's great, go ahead, go out,” it really makes me feel bad. I'd rather them be straightforward with me. – *Shannon*

Boundaries

Teenagers passionately protect their own privacy—not just their persons and possessions, but also their thoughts, feelings, and actions. When they sense an adult intrusion, they are apt to close down a conversation with a one-word answer or a slammed door. Parents who reach into what teenagers consider private often want only to save them from self-harm. But if they routinely probe for too much information, they may find the door locked when kids most need it open.

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When they ask me about school and I don't answer fully, they always tell me, "You never tell me anything about school." But they really won't ever understand, unless I sit down for like three hours and talk to them. I just don't feel like getting them caught up on my entire life. School's kind of separate from home, and I like to keep it that way, very much so. – *Greg*

It seems sometimes in my family, there always has to be a conversation about "Why are you acting like this" or "Why are you so gloomy right now?" Sometimes when you're in a bad mood you just want to sleep it off, or watch some TV, or just do something to calm down. Sometimes you don't know what the reason is, and maybe it's just something as simple as being tired. It just feels a little excessive when there always has to be a reason for everything. – *Devon*

I'm just walking in the door, and the first thing my mother does is, "You know you have to go and wash the dishes, right?" Come on, man, give me some time to rest! Let me get a good five minutes to sit down and rethink my thoughts. – *Jamaal*

I hate it when my parents assume that anything I don't want them to know is negative. Like if I'm opening my email, my mom will come over and stare at me, so I won't type in my password yet, and she'll be like, "Well why aren't you checking it yet?" And I'm like, "'Cause you're watching me!" And she's like, "Oh, well now I really want to know what you have for email!" As if, yeah. – *Devon*

Our room is like our own personal house, it should be left to us and no one else. We keep it how we want it, we put our privacy in our room, and we like it that way. So to go into our room and do whatever you want to it, rearrange things how you want it, is like having your next door neighbor go into your house and rearrange your entire living room set. And to knock off our room door is to knock off both back and front doors to your house, open to the entire world. – *Blake*

Respect

In strong relationships between adults and teenagers, respect goes both ways. But even though both parties badly want it, respect erodes easily in the daily give and take between family members. One person resents being taken for granted, another makes an offhand comment that stings, another comes down hard at the wrong moment. Conflicts are part of family life, but the best interactions across generations grant young people the individual dignity that they seek as sharply as their elders.

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I have a bunch of plans for the weekend, and on Friday before I go to school they're like, "We're doing something this weekend and you've gotta go." I'm like, "What?! I had plans!" That makes me feel what I have to do is not important. – *Ron*

It's horrible when your parents comment about your clothing in front of other people. Once when I was going out with friends, my mom said, "You're going out wearing that? That's really low-cut!" Thanks, Mom! – *Alice*

I'm not even sure my parents know how much I want to make them happy, and how much their criticism actually really hurts me, which I find amazing. I can be awfully stubborn, but I've always been a very good kid. I guess there are lots of things that they just don't notice. I'm not sure my parents know that I wouldn't do drugs. I can't tell. – *Stephanie*

When my mother's not listening to me, she nods her head, gives a little smirk. And I'm like, Yeah you're not listening, so I'm not listening to you. If my mom were listening, her face would show it all. Her face would show that she's interested and she's actually paying attention to what I'm saying. – *Blake*

I like it when they let me know that they're there, even if I don't want to talk to them. They let me know that they're going to listen when I'm ready. That's always wonderful, 'cause like twenty minutes later, I'm like, "Yeah I'm ready to talk now." – *Lizz*

Parents in Hispanic families tend to raise their voice a lot, so the whole neighborhood can hear. My dad stands in your face and yells at you like a military officer—you can feel his breath on your face. When he does that to me, I want to cry inside. That's the process of breaking down a child. – *Moses*

I miss that praise I used to get: "Oh my gosh, you can tie your shoe!" – *Shannon*

Trust

Teenagers often find it hard to drop their guard around other people. They want to do well in others' eyes, and criticism hurts them whether it comes from peers or adults. Ironically, home can be one of the only places they feel safe to act the way they feel. There they bank on a "trust fund" whose deposits they can add to or withdraw, with confidence that the balance won't reach zero. But this doesn't mean they are ready to confide in their parents. Their trust will build, teenagers say, if parents relax and give them time, share some of their own problems and mistakes, model honesty, and don't expect kids to tell them everything. It's often easier, they add, to trust an adult who's not their parent.

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Depending on which person I'm talking to, I might have to change my face three different times—I know how to change, adapt, and mold to each different person. I show them facets of myself, but the things that I really feel, the things that I really want to say, people don't want to hear, people think that's weird. People would judge me, and I don't want to be exposed and hurt. I don't take the risk. – *September*

If you're at school you have to act a certain way, just so people won't hate you, just to fit in. You don't want people to judge you because, let's say, you're sad; you don't want them to see you crying because they're going to think you're weak, or see you hanging out with some people because they'll think you're just like them. It's different if you're at home. It's like you're in charge, it's your house, be comfortable. When you get home, you release your face. – *Maria*

I think for the most part your parents take for granted that you're going to be a good kid, until you start to not be one. There's like a "Yup, this is what my kid's going to be like." Then you start to make mistakes, and then the line is drawn a little bit lower. There comes a point that I've not hit yet, where they start to question everything. It's kind of a trust issue. They take things for granted until you start to break their trust. – *Aurelia*

I notice that parents tend to get suspicious when their kids don't tell them anything. They feel like their kids could be sneaking around. So you kind of learn how much to tell your parents to make them feel comfortable. Like I tell them some things about what people do, so that they know that I don't. I'll tell them, "Oh yeah, those guys are the ones that they just get drunk all the time." So then it's like, she doesn't assume that it's me going and getting drunk. – *Emma*

I feel like I have more of a connection with her than I do with my own mom sometimes. It's not just me going to her when I need to; sometimes she'll come to me, and just talk. She's told me many, many things about her childhood and her past, hard times she's had to deal with, and over-coming addictions, and trouble with the law. And I can talk to her about everything, like sex, drugs, anything I need to. – *Addie*

I'm Not You

Parents of teenagers can't help comparing their kids with themselves. Understandably, they may want to shape their children in their own likeness, passing along their values, experience, skills, even worries. Often they want to help their children do better than they did, fulfilling dreams that might have passed them by or avoiding wrong turns that cut their own paths short. Adolescents hear these parental messages loud and clear; they will color the rest of their lives. For now, though, teenagers' bottom line has to read, "I'm not you."

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I don't feel my interests are constant. I used to like to draw a lot and I don't like to do that anymore. They're like, "Oh you should keep drawing 'cause you could be an artist!" That's how they remember me, Greg the Artist, even though I change. – *Greg*

My family knows I want to be a writer, so for my birthday they give me these annoying cute little store-bought journals, with pictures of puppies or stupid aphorisms on the front. They don't realize I like to decorate my own journals! My friends know me better; they decorate a journal for me, with pictures of things I like, so it's more personal. – *Alice*

Employers shouldn't expect the worst of teenagers when they see them, just because they look different. We tend to wear baggier clothes, or just the way we carry ourselves, not really like adults do, more loosely, more casual, and that could throw a person off, if they don't know much about us. Without giving the benefit of the doubt they're already shutting us down, shutting us out. – *D.J.*

I don't like when adults make judgments about me from experiences long ago. Like say I made a mistake a year ago, they won't give me a chance to redeem myself. They automatically assume because I'm young that I'll keep on making the same mistakes over and over again, and that's not true. – *Cotnell*

Just make sure that there's a set time to talk about stuff like college. Because if it's like they'll corner you every dinner, whenever you're in the car, or I'll be in the shower and my mom will go in to brush her teeth and bring it up—you tune them out. But if they say, "Okay, every Tuesday night from 6:30 to 7:00 we're going to check in about how college is going," then you're prepared for it. And you know that then you're not going to have to deal with it all the time, every day of the week. – *Devon*

Every parent wants their kid to be a big famous doctor that discovers cures and all that. But it's a lot of pressure, even if you don't realize it. If your mom says, "You're going to be great, you're going to do wondrous things," you're like, "Well what if I don't? Do you not want me anymore?" – *Dan*

Just for parents to get over their pride, and come to terms with it. This is me, I'm your son, love me or love me not, I don't know, but if you really do love me and care, then you'll be behind me with the choices that I make. Even though they may not be the right ones. – *D.J.*

Structure and Support

Parents rightly worry that teenagers aren't ready for all the independence they want. Given too much freedom, they might not have the judgment to make good choices, especially in such areas as drugs, alcohol, driving, and sex. But strict rules aren't necessarily the way to help an adolescent mature, teenagers say. In fact, kids whose parents support them by giving them practice in decision-making learn a lot from that practice, even if they do make mistakes. Learning where to draw the line, however, can be just as hard for parents as for their kids.

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It makes me feel like I have to learn from her mistakes—she doesn't even give me a chance to make any mistakes before she makes her judgment. She just flat out says no. She's not letting me make any mistakes of my own. – *Tabitha*

I went to Argentina for six months junior year, as an exchange student. My parents helped by standing in the way in a constructive manner. As opposed to just saying, “No you can't do that, it's too much of a risk,” they said, “It's an option for you to do that, but you need to prove to yourself and to us that you're ready.” I had to show them that I was responsible enough to handle it. So they set some boundaries that I had to meet: I had to not do stupid stuff like drugs or get in trouble, and at school I had to move ahead half a year early in my main classes. I was really proud of myself by the time I went, because I knew I had earned the right to go. – *Devon*

You're just planting anger in their heart, and messing up their lives, if you tell a child “You're out of my house if you're this, this, or that.” Parents' job is to raise their children and teach them to become an adult, raising them through all that. – *Moses*

A lot of parents, like my mom, say you shouldn't have sex, but they won't have the talk with you. They're scared to have the sex talk; you should just know, and that's it. My mom said to me, “If you ever get pregnant you're out of the house.” My mom thinks if they give someone the pill they're supporting them—[she doesn't realize that] at the same time they're protecting them. – *Irene*

You should try and tell your kids to stay safe, whether they listen or not. You have to tell them, just in case they are listening. Tell them, “I love you, and if those cigarettes give you lung cancer, I'd never be able to live with myself for letting you smoke.” – *Alice*

A lot of parents hold their children so tight they lose them. I use this metaphor: I walk to the beach and I have sand in my hand. I see that as parents holding you in their hand—if you squeeze the sand too tight it comes out of the hand, and you lose it. – *Moses*

Work and the Future

Work serves for teenagers as a picture of the future. It stands for their growing financial independence, however modest their paycheck. Whether they like the job or not, it gives them practice in self-discipline, appearance, and interpersonal behavior—even when a parent is the employer. It can ignite their ambitions for some careers, or temper their illusions about others. It also gives them a first-hand taste of discrimination or privilege. As teenagers look for work and try their hand at jobs, the adults they encounter can have a powerful impact on them, good or bad.

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The first day, [my dad] told me, “Clock in!” He started treating me as an employee, instead of a son, and I was kind of shocked. When he told me to clean up the restroom, I’m like, “I’m not going to clean up anything!” I had to realize that when you’re on the job and you get paid for it, you have to do what they say. It’s going to prepare me better for when I go to work at a real job, because I’ll know the ropes. – *Erinn*

If they could just be, like, “These are the positions available, let’s discuss what you think you’d be good at,” instead of saying, “Since you’re younger than this guy, we’re just going to give you this for the lowest pay, and that’s that.” At the linens store my boss just told me what to do and I did it; he’d say “Good job” or “Bad job,” but no way trying to help me get up anywhere. At the supermarket, I wasn’t ever going to do anything more than stay outside and tend to the parking lot. They weren’t interested in helping me excel in the job. – *Nesim*

I got to learn about law and go to court, do simple cases. My boss would encourage me through my ideas, like, “Okay, this is what you think, so then think about this.” Not like, “I’ve been through it all before, this is how you should do it and this is how I want you to do it.” He was always willing to give information to me, take information from me, and improve both. – *Blake*

The owner was a really good guy, a fair guy. But the people that worked in the kitchen—not a good influence. It’s just basically people that have messed up a lot. They do a lot of drugs and they drink a lot. And just getting into high school, I was like, “Oh all right, why not?” You’re working with twenty-year-olds, and they’re all sitting there getting drunk after work, taking cigarette breaks all the time, and I’m like, “I want a cigarette break! I’d better start smoking cigarettes!” – *Tommy*

This lady knows exactly what’s going on with me. She knows that I run track and that when the season starts I’m only going to be working on weekends. She knows that there will probably be days that my mom will be sick or my little brother has football practice and I just won’t be able to come. And she knows because she asked, not because I just opened up to her and told her my whole life story. – *Camillia*

Make This Time Count

Because teenagers care so much about independence, parents may assume that they don't want to spend much time with their families. But in fact, adolescents often talk wistfully about missing the time that their parents spent with them when they were younger. As everyone's schedules grow more complicated, it gets hard to fit even simple family activities, like dinner, into the daily routine. But teenagers realize that their years at home will soon come to an end, and they value the things they do together with parents.

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I can hear my mama no matter what race I'm doing—no matter if it's a 400 or an 800 [meter], she yells the whole time. And I can hear her, and only her, the whole time. Not just because I can just pick out her voice—she's literally the loudest person in the whole place. I'm so serious. It really helps out. – *Camillia*

Me and my dad go road-tripping because he really likes driving, and just being in that confined space of his car and nothing else to do, we talk to each other and we get along with each other, and there's no pressure, because if I want to end the conversation I can just turn the radio on. – *Thea*

My parents aren't really too busy—but when we all sit here in the living room together, we're never all doing the same thing. If I ever have kids I always want to have family time together, with no TV, no computer, no phones. You know, all sit down and play a game, or have dinner together and just talk about each other's lives instead of having other virtual distractions. Whenever we do work on something together, like if we make cookies or something, I like doing that. – *Tabitha*

Just about every single night we eat dinner together. And Sunday is like our family day, we always play games together, just stuff like card games, basically anything. There are times when I just want to be out with my friends on Sunday when I'm supposed to be with my family, but in a way I do value the relationship that we have, just because I grew up with it. It's a huge part of my life. – *Lily*

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What Kids Can Do, Inc.

Through an array of media and publication formats, What Kids Can Do brings youth voices and work to bear on critical issues facing families, schools, and communities. It also presents powerful examples of what young people, guided by teachers and other adults, can contribute and achieve. www.whatkidscando.org

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