

# Listening to Understand

*The Superpower  
of Strong Parents*



**Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.**

*Listening to Understand: The Superpower of Strong Parents*

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# Introduction

The payoffs for listening to understand your child's thoughts and feelings are huge, as are the consequences for failing to do so. That's why I wrote this guide for you, the parent of a precious child.

Improving your ability to listen starts with learning more about it. This ebook on listening is adapted from Chapter 4, "Listen to Understand," in [\*Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills\*](#), an unprecedented how-to manual for parents who are doing their best to help their kids grow up to be happy, successful, independent adults.

To actually *become* a better listener, you'll need to make the skill your habitual response. This means rewiring your brain, and that means lots of practice—a consistent effort over time.

My advice: *Stick with it*, and *be patient*. Like mastering any skill, wiring your brain for listening to understand means using the skills every day in the real world with your family. Anyone who has learned a new skill will tell you that you gotta get your reps.

Two bonuses for improving the way you listen:

- This is the skill that will make you a better listener in all your relationships, including those at work.
- You can continue improving the way you listen for the rest of your life. You will never get to the end of your mastery.

Good luck with your learning journey, and be sure to return to this book from time to time to stay on course!

Denny

# Listening Is a Superpower

I've been helping adults improve their communication skills for over 30 years, and in my opinion, listening is the No. 1 interpersonal skill you can have. Called "active listening" by Thomas Gordon, it was the centerpiece of his 1970 book, *P.E.T. – Parent Effectiveness Training*. This way of listening, adapted from techniques used by therapists and counselors, has also been referred to as "reflective listening" and "empathic listening." I prefer Stephen Covey's term: "listening to understand."

*Listening to understand is the most important element of parent-child communication.*

When interacting with your child, you know you won't be doing all the talking. Kids always have something to say, and you'll need to hear it.

Knowing they've been heard and understood has a powerful effect on a child. When they sense their ideas, feelings, and problems are being considered, they feel valued, appreciated, and engaged.

Also, the ability to grasp what your child is trying to say is a critical component of the other skills featured in the book, *Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills*. This is why I encourage you to work on listening first.

It's not always easy to listen well.

Often a child isn't sure how to say what they want to say. When they do open up, it's almost never in the form of a logical, well-organized speech. Along the way, they might digress. The points they try to make, which they may not fully grasp themselves, could be mixed with anecdotes, opinions, complaints,



demands, and feelings. They might start with whatever is on their mind and go from there. They may even keep some of what they're thinking and feeling to themselves. As a result, the meaning of what they're trying to express could be hard to sort out.

If you aren't a skilled listener—and most people aren't—you may end up doing more talking than listening, reacting with your own feelings, seeing the situation from your own point of view, and misinterpreting your child's message.

The consequences of a failure to understand what your child is trying to tell you can be huge. For one thing, you'll miss an opportunity to learn what's going on in their world. If your child senses that they're not getting through to you, they may conclude that you don't care. They might feel disrespected and misunderstood and wonder if coming to you is worth the effort. Your relationship with your child could begin to unravel. Poor listening is one of the main reasons kids distance themselves from their parents.



# What Often Happens...

Consider this classic situation, in which a mom is frustrated by her daughter's apparent lack of motivation for her studies:

**Mom:** "Will you please get off that cell phone?"

**Daughter:** "What's the problem? I'm texting Breanna."

**Mom:** "You spend more time on that damn phone than you do on your studies."

**Daughter:** "I've done my homework."

**Mom:** "You made two Bs and a C last semester. That doesn't cut it."

**Daughter:** "So?"

**Mom:** "You're smarter than that. Colleges pay attention to your grades."

**Daughter:** "I'm allowed to have friends. I'm allowed to talk to my friends."

**Mom:** "You're on the phone too much.

I'm sorry we gave it to you."

**Daughter:** "I'm sorry you make such a big deal about it."

**Mom:** "I want you to put that cell phone down and act like you care about school."

**Daughter:** "And I want you to get out of my room! I deserve my privacy."

**Mom:** "That's no way to talk to your mother."

**Daughter:** "I don't like it when you try to control my life! Why don't you just leave me alone!"

**Mom:** *Leaves the bedroom and slams the door behind her.*

Mom says "please," but she's actually giving her daughter an order. She cares about her daughter's future, but she accuses her of neglect and lectures her. This enrages her daughter, who feels she has a right to manage her schoolwork and her life in her own way. The result is alienation.



Mom is interacting from a traditional mindset of exercising authority. In her mind, she's acting in the best interests of her daughter. As a result, she all but closes off the channel of communication. If she had listened to her daughter's needs and engaged her in dialog, things might have turned out differently.





# Old Listening Habits Can Kick In

Not many people have had training in how to listen. And yet, even those who've had this training and have tried to practice the skills with their kids often discover how hard it is to simply recognize the opportunities for using them. That's when old habits kick in. Instead of listening for the meaning and checking for understanding, moms and dads may react emotionally, exercise their authority, interrupt, and give orders.

My business partner, Meredith Bell, told me this story. When her daughter Alison was in high school, she used to babysit after school to earn spending money. One afternoon Alison had a difficult situation with one of the children, and she was upset when she got home. As Meredith listened to her describe what happened, Meredith jumped into problem-solving mode, asking a lot of questions and then offering ideas about how her daughter might have handled the situation differently. As Alison continued to talk about her experience, Meredith continued to offer advice.

Finally, Alison said emphatically,

“Mom, I don't need your suggestions. I had a horrible day. All I really wanted you to do is hear me out. I've already taken care of this.” These words stopped Meredith in her tracks. She realized Alison was looking for understanding and compassion, not advice.

All these years later, Meredith still remembers how easy it was to disregard her own guidance about best listening practices. That's why I emphasize that mastering listening skills is a lifetime pursuit.



# You Gotta Remember to Use the Skill!

## Listening Moments and the Listening Mindset

The first step to listening well is being aware of when you need to listen—what I call “listening moments”—when somebody is trying to tell you something. These might be occasions when your child’s behavior takes you by surprise: unexpected problems, conflicts, mistakes in judgment, or a point of view contrary to your own. You’ll feel your own response: disappointment, frustration, or anger. These feelings are your signal that *this is a listening moment*, not an occasion to react. Once you realize you need to be listening, the next step is to check that you’re in the proper frame of mind for listening—what we call the “listening mindset.”

### Recognize the “listening moment”

*...when your child is trying to tell you something  
you need to hear.*



## Engage your “listening mindset”

*I care about my child's problems, thoughts, and feelings. Something is going on with them right now, and I want to know what it is. So rather than react negatively or assume I understand, I check what I'm hearing.*

Thinking these thoughts at the right time will be like having your relationship radar set at the right listening frequency, preparing you for effective listening.



# The Four Vital Listening Skills

Listening to understand involves four skills:

1. Give your child your undivided attention.
2. Sense what your child is feeling and express empathy.
3. Listen for the meaning and check what you think you understand.
4. Encourage your child to continue talking until you're sure you understand what they're trying to say.

*The following sections describe these skills in detail.*



# Listening Skill 1

## *Give your child your undivided attention.*

In his book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, communication expert Marshall Goldsmith says that former president Bill Clinton was an “absolute master” at giving his attention to anyone who spoke to him. “He acted as if you were the only person in the room. Every fiber of his being, from his eyes to his body language, communicated that he was locked into what you were saying. He conveyed how important you were, not how important he was.”

Whether your child is venting or you sense something is bothering them, this is an opportunity to demonstrate that you genuinely care about what they're trying to say, that they can get through to you. Once you realize that this is a listening moment and your mind is set for listening, make it your top priority to find out what's going on. Stop what you're doing and do what Bill Clinton is said to have done: *consciously focus 100% on your child.*

Multi-tasking or fiddling with objects will distract your attention. Put down

your remote, book or pen, and turn to face your child. Try to keep your mind clear, because even your thoughts, feelings, opinions, memories, and imagination can distract you from hearing what they're saying. If necessary, invite your child to talk with you in another room or outside where you can face each other in relative quiet and privacy.

Communicate through your posture and facial expressions that *your child is the most important person in your world right now*. From time to time, give them an accepting smile, a nod, or an occasional “yes” or “I see” to let them know you're focused and listening.





## Listening Skill 2

### *Sense what your child is feeling and express empathy.*

Most of the time, what you sense will be a combination of thoughts and emotions. Sometimes a kid will lead with what they're feeling. Other times they'll be able to speak in a rational way. Even then, you may pick up on how they feel about it. Showing you understand their needs and feelings will make it easier for them to open up.

Mindfulness is a crucial first step to expressing empathy. Mindfulness means

focusing on the present moment to be fully aware of what's in front of you. No parent is in this state of mind all the time. On a busy day, most parents only intermittently experience moments of intense mindfulness. When you're busy, you may be aware of your child, but in a distant way. This is normal.

Before expressing empathy, you need to experience it. And to experience empathy, you need to be focused on what your child is experiencing and feeling. This means shifting from your own thoughts and feelings to sensing your child in the here-and-now. Your concern is most real and intense when you're able to do this without judging, reacting, or paying attention to your own thoughts and feelings. Only when you're mindfully aware of your child is an empathic connection possible.





Mark Goulston, in his book, *Just Listen*, says this:

*“Making someone ‘feel felt’ simply means putting yourself in the other person’s shoes. When you succeed, you can change the dynamics of a relationship in a heart-beat. At that instant, instead of trying to get the better of each other, you ‘get’ each other and the breakthrough can lead to cooperation, collaboration, and effective communication.”*

# How to Express Empathy

The purpose of empathy is for your child to “feel felt.” Ideally, they’ll sense that you appreciate their feelings about what they’re saying.

The goal isn’t to actually feel their feelings. Rather, you want to sense their feelings accurately, and based on your own life experience *appreciate* what they’re feeling. And then describe what you’re sensing.

Expressing empathy follows three steps:

1. **Be “in the moment” with your child.** Empty your mind of every thought and feeling about what may have happened. Approach your child and the situation with fresh awareness. Consciously focus on them in the present moment. Observe facial expressions, posture, gestures, and tone of voice.
2. **Imagine what they’re feeling.** Imagine yourself in their situation—not to agree or disagree, and not to judge, but simply to be aware of and understand what they’re experiencing.

## 3. Express what you imagine they’re feeling in one of three ways:

- **Ask:** “Are you disappointed that you have to redo this?”
- **Assume:** “You must be disappointed that we have to do this again.”
- **Express the feeling:** “It’s disappointing to have to go back and start over.”

Their reaction to your expression of empathy may be a nonverbal one, or they may say something to let you know how accurate your perceptions were. Pay attention to this so you know how to continue listening.



# Listening Skill 3

*Listen for the meaning and check what you think you understand.*



The biggest mistake parents make when listening is *assuming* they understand what their child is trying to say. The truth is, even skilled communicators sometimes miss the point. So, with your attention focused on what they're saying, *listen for the meaning*.

Interpret both the verbal and nonverbal messages, and ask yourself: *Why is my child telling me this?*

And when you think you understand some of what they're expressing, check to be sure. *In your own words, say what you think you've understood so far.*

*"Are you saying that...?"*

*"Do you mean that...?"*

*"It sounds like..."*

*"So what you're getting at is..."*

*"Let me see if I heard you right. You..."*

The skill is *not* to repeat word for word what your child has said. Instead, express what you think they're getting at—the *meaning* of what they've said.

Don't worry that you'll get it wrong. The important thing is to *check your understanding*.

If your interpretation even slightly misses the point, your child will let you know. They may even correct you. As they try to explain, continue listening for the meaning and once again check what you think you understand.

# Listening Skill 4

*Encourage your child to continue talking until you're sure you understand what they're trying to say.*

Most of the time you won't hear the whole story all at once. Even if your child confirms that you correctly understood what you've heard so far, they may not have gotten to the main point. They may have more to say. You may have to check your understanding several times before you're sure you got the message.

So, ask open-ended questions to encourage your child to continue talking—not so you can offer your opinion or advice, but to be sure you heard the whole story. Remember, an open-ended question is the kind of question that gets your child to say what's on their mind. It doesn't ask for specific information, which can be given in a one- or two-word answer, such as “No,” or “Twice,” or “Fine.” Replies to factual questions tend to halt an interchange rather than keep it going. Some examples of how to encour-

age your child to say more:

*“Go on.”*

*“Please continue.”*

*“And then what happened?”*

*“So, what do you think?”*

*“Why do you think he did that?”*

*“How do you feel about that?”*

*“How important is this to you?”*

*“What else happened?”*

*“Why do you think this is your best choice?”*

*“How will this affect your decision?”*

*“What's your plan?”*

Sometimes you can tell when your child is having a bad day but isn't saying anything. Showing that you've noticed can get them to open up. This may create a listening moment.

# What Effective Listening Looks Like...

**Dad:** “You seem upset. What’s going on?”

**Daughter:** “Nothing.”

**Dad:** “You don’t seem like your usual self. Is something bothering you?” (CHECKING NONVERBAL MESSAGE)

**Daughter:** “No, not really.”

**Dad:** “Okay, it sure seems like something’s going on. You can tell me.”

**Daughter:** “It’s Mom. She keeps trying to run my life.”

**Dad:** “What do you mean?”  
(OPEN-ENDED QUESTION)

**Daughter:** “She butts into my business, telling me how to study and when to use my cell phone.”

**Dad:** “So you’re bummed about it.”  
(CHECKING MESSAGE)

**Daughter:** “Yeah, I guess so.”

**Dad:** “What do you plan to do?”

**Daughter:** “I don’t know. I don’t think I can get her to stop.”

**Dad:** “You want her to change, but you don’t know if there’s anything you can do about it.” (CHECKING MESSAGE)

**Daughter:** “Right. I hate her.”

**Dad:** “You’re angry. (CHECKING MESSAGE)

**Daughter:** “Right.”

**Dad:** “How are you going to resolve this?” (OPEN-ENDED QUESTION)

**Daughter:** “I’m not sure. Maybe if I can talk to her when she’s calm. Just tell her I don’t want to argue anymore. Tell her how I feel, that I want her to believe in me. Just trust me.”

**Dad:** “That sounds like a plan. Do you think you can follow through?” (OFFERING ENCOURAGEMENT)

**Daughter:** “I think so. What have I got to lose?”





The magical thing about this way of listening is that when someone verifies your interpretation, *you know that they feel they've been heard and understood*, which inspires a feeling of connectedness that reinforces your relationship. And when you encourage your child to think through their problems (without offering your own solutions), you help them exercise critical thinking.

Listening this way often has a wonderful bonus: it can help your child clarify their thinking. When they open up to you, at first they may be distressed; but they may not know exactly what's bothering them. They may be anxious or upset and not know why. When you achieve an understanding of what's bothering

them, this could be a useful revelation for them, too.

If you're like most parents, listening to understand will mean replacing old communication habits with new ones. This means time, effort and persistence, because your old habits are physically wired as circuits in your brain. If you sometimes forget to listen to understand, or if your efforts seem awkward, this is a normal aspect of the skill-building process.

*The key is to keep trying.* If you stick with it, you'll gradually rewire your brain, and using the skill will begin to feel easier and more natural.



# That Interchange between You and Your Child— Done Right...

**Mom:** “You sure are busy with your phone tonight.”

**Daughter:** “What’s the problem? I’m texting Breanna.”

**Mom:** “I don’t have a problem with it, as long as you’re taking care of your studies.”

**Daughter:** “I’ve done my homework.”

**Mom:** “You made two Bs and a C last semester. You’re capable of so much more.”

**Daughter:** “So?”

**Mom:** “You know colleges pay attention to grades. How do you feel about that?”

**Daughter:** “I’m allowed to have friends. I’m allowed to talk to my friends.”

**Mom:** “You feel I should trust you to take care of your academics.”

**Daughter:** “Right.”

**Mom:** “I know you can do it. You have a good mind. And a good heart.”

**Daughter:** “Thanks, Mom. I just want to manage my own life. Have friends and take care of school.”

**Mom:** “I hear you. And I trust you. It’s your life, Honey.”

**Daughter:** “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll handle it. I’ll be fine.”

You may have to work to understand what your child is trying to express. But it’s worth it. In this version, the mom didn’t cut her child off or simply tell her what to do. Instead, she listened and showed she understood. She checked what she thought she was hearing and found out what was bothering her child.



# Tips for Optimum Listening

**Watch out for your emotional reactions.** Old habits die hard. When your child annoys or upsets you, you may catch yourself reacting emotionally. The feeling of rising emotions is usually a signal to listen instead.

**Review your “listening mindset.”** You may have trouble engaging the right mindset for listening if you can’t remember what it is.

**Be careful not to engage in conversation when you need to be listening.** Think of conversation and listening as two different things. Conversation involves sharing each other’s stories, opinions, etc. It’s a great way to enjoy a connection with your child. There’s a time for conversation and a time to focus on listening. Sometimes when you’re just talking, you’ll sense that your child wants to tell you something. If you understand the difference between conversation and listening, you can consciously

shift into a listening mode.

**Don’t interrupt.** Listening is about your child, not you. Interrupting to offer your own input will make it hard for them to complete their thought. Also, it implies that what you have to say is more important than what they have to say. Remember: your job is to understand, so your child should be doing most of the talking.



**Be flexible about how you use the four skills.** One good approach is to follow the skills in sequence. However, after you've become aware of a listening moment and have engaged your listening mindset, sometimes performing any one of the four skills in isolation can be effective. For example, expressing empathy is a powerful way of connecting and in certain situations can, by itself, achieve the understanding you seek. The same is true of listening for the meaning and checking the message. If the problem your child is struggling with isn't an emotional one, expressing empathy may not be needed. If you're lucky, the message will be a straightforward one; and they can get to the point without further discussion. Even if you skip the empathy step, you can use it later in your listening if you sense that the emotional element is more of a factor than you initially thought. At other times, simply encouraging them to continue speaking can be enough for your child to clarify their thinking and even achieve a resolution.

**Don't offer your experience, advice or solutions.** Once you understand your child's issue, it can be a mistake to

feel responsible for resolving it. Yes, you have more experience and know-how. But kids need to learn how to deal with their own challenges, and doing so will help reinforce their problem-solving



skills. You may sense that the solution they come up with might not work, and you'll be tempted to suggest a better approach. Giving advice and offering solutions can inhibit a young person from thinking creatively about their

options. Unless their solution has grave consequences, consider giving them the opportunity to take responsibility for their efforts and learn from their mistakes. You encourage your child to think for themselves when you ask open-ended questions about the root of the problem, possible solutions, their ultimate decision, and their action steps.

**Keep an open mind. Don't disagree, take offense or argue.** When your child opens up to you, you may hear opinions or ideas that surprise you. Remember that kids learn and develop by trying things. Rather than reacting negatively, which would block communication, consider this an opportunity to just listen and learn what they're thinking.

**When listening to your child, be patient.** It may be as hard for them to explain what's on their mind as it is for you to grasp the explanation. It's a rare young person who gets straight to the point.

**Look for listening moments when using other skills.** Listening is a key



element of other communication skills, such as coaching your child to think, giving feedback, offering encouragement, engaging in dialogue, and resolving conflict. Each of these situations will produce a special “listening moment.”

**Help your child *listen to you*.** You may be listening to understand, but your child probably isn't. When you want to be sure they “get your message,” ask a question like this: “*So, what did you understand from what I just said?*”

**Remember that becoming a more effective listener is a journey.** While



this approach to listening to understand actually works, it takes practice to get comfortable with it. The first few times you try it, it won't feel natural. But keep at it. The more experience you gain, the more your confidence will build. The key is not to expect a 100% success rate at first. Give yourself credit for your initial successes. The more you apply the skill, the easier it will get and the more often you'll experience success. No matter how many times you miss an opportunity to listen, recognize what happened and remind yourself to apply the skill next

time. You can always revisit this guide to remind yourself of what to do. With experience, you'll be the kind of listener your child needs you to be.

**Keep the goal in mind.** Listening to understand is one of those skills, like chess or tennis, that you can continue to improve indefinitely. The more skilled you become, the more your child will open up to you, because they'll feel they've been heard, understood, and respected. Their self-esteem and the bond between you will grow stronger.



# Get Your “Reps”

When you work out in the gym, you do repetitions or “reps” of an exercise to build a specific muscle group. To strengthen your listening skills, you’ll be rewiring your brain, so you’ll need plenty of practice. That means you’ll want to stay alert for listening moments like these...

- The golden opportunity: your child comes to you wanting to talk
- When you try using one of the listening skills and your child responds
- You and your child disagree
- Your child makes a case for something they want
- You give feedback and they get defensive
- You notice a change in mood, either positive or negative
- After asking an open-ended question, listen to understand the answer





# Listening—A Summary

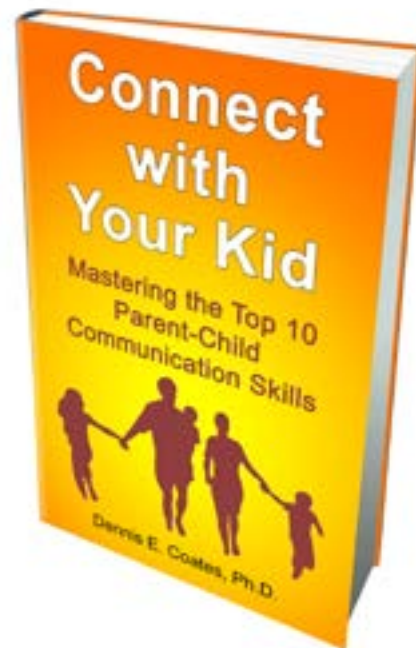
- ✓ Listening effectively is a vital component of many other communication skills.
- ✓ Listening to understand is how you find out what's happening with your child. Also, it causes them to feel heard and appreciated, which promotes a strong parent-child relationship.
- ✓ Recognize when you need to listen—listening moments—and engage the right attitude—the listening mindset.
- ✓ Effective listening begins with giving your undivided attention.
- ✓ When you express empathy, you learn what your child is feeling.
- ✓ When you check for understanding, you learn what your child is trying to say.
- ✓ It may take a while to hear the whole message, so encourage your child to continue.

## About *Connect with Your Kid*

By now you understand why I believe listening is the most important communication skill you can have. And there are several other critical interpersonal skills. They help parents grow the bond by acting as coaches, not critics of their kids.

The content of this ebook was adapted from Chapter 4 of [\*Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills\*](#), a how-to manual for improving your listening and nine other skills:

- Listen to understand
- Coach people to think for themselves
- Guide learning from experience
- Get buy-in for expectations
- Offer encouragement
- Express appreciation
- Give feedback constructively
- Accept feedback graciously
- Engage in dialogue
- Resolve conflict creatively



It takes time to master a new skill or to replace a dysfunctional behavior pattern with a more productive one. To make these skills habitual, you need to make a long-term effort to using them in your home. Also, when acquiring any new skill, having a coach is the accelerator—a long-term resource that provides accountability, reinforcement, feedback, and encouragement.

For most parents, the practical solution is *peer coaching*—parents supporting each other as they improve skills that boost their ability to bond with their child. These two books empower this effort:



*Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills* is a unique how-to manual for improving the skills that nurture your relationship with your child.



*Parents Coaching Parents* gives a few simple tips for parents who want to encourage each other while improving their communication skills.

Imagine what would happen if all the parents in your community were to use these two books to meet regularly and coach each other to improve the way they interact with their children.

To find out how groups can implement this cost-effective solution, contact Meredith Bell at: [Meredith@GrowStrongLeaders.com](mailto:Meredith@GrowStrongLeaders.com) or 757-656-4765.

## About the Author



**Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.**

Dr. Denny Coates is an expert in parent-child communication and adolescent brain development. He is the author of several books and hundreds of articles for parents. His two latest books, *Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills* and *Parents Coaching Parents*, provide a practical, step-by-step approach that helps parents build a bond with their child that lasts a lifetime. You can find information about his books and other resources at [DrDennyCoates.com](http://DrDennyCoates.com). He is the father of two grown sons, and he lives with his wife, Kathleen Scott, near San Antonio, Texas.

**LinkedIn:** [DrDennyCoates](http://DrDennyCoates)

**Twitter:** [@DrDennyCoates](https://twitter.com/DrDennyCoates)

## Other Books by Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.

### For Parents

*Connect with Your Kid: Mastering the Top 10 Parent-Child Communication Skills*

*Parents Coaching Parents: How Parents Can Help Each Other Improve Family Communication Skills*

*How Your Teen Can Grow a Smarter Brain: The 7 Game-Changers That Will Maximize Your Teen's Brainpower—Permanently*

*Preparing Your Teen for Life: 50 Insights to Help Your Child Grow Up Happy, Successful, and Independent*

*Conversations with the Wise Uncle: The Secret to Being Strong as a Teenager and Preparing for Success as an Adult*

*Conversations with the Wise Aunt: The Secret to Being Strong as a Teenager and Preparing for Success as an Adult*

*The Sacred Purpose: How Youth Sports Organizations Can Do More to Prepare Athletes for Life*