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## Appearances aside, teenagers listen to their parents

You may not be aware of it, but teens hold a huge convention every year. Virtually all of them attend. The primary business of the convention is to develop various techniques for convincing parents that their comments to their teens are boring, completely unreasonable or totally unfair.

Workshops at the convention include sessions on topics such as "How to Rock and Roll Your Eyeballs," "Communicating Indifference With a Power Body Slouch," and "Fighting the Urge to Stay Awake." Most presentations are available on cassette tapes and compact discs and are replayed on MTV.

According to Dr. Mark Lowery, a recent speaker on this subject at a conference in Tulsa, most parents respond to these techniques by going into a rage of frustration and despair, which is most pleasing to their young. Once a parent has "lost it," the teen is justified in disregarding what the parent is saying. The child has won, and the parents know it.

In actuality, Dr. Lowery submits, teens actually do listen to their parents, even though they do everything possible to convey the impression that they are not listening at all. He recommends that parents take confidence in this and avoid the temptation to lose their temper. He maintains that keeping your cool and trusting patiently in your children will ultimately pay big dividends if you can just hang in there.

I saw this principle at work a few years ago at a youth retreat for teenage boys in Oklahoma City.



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During each presentation, which was given by an adult, you would have thought the young audience wanted to be anywhere but at the retreat. Not a single boy was looking at the speaker. Most had their eyes closed. They were reclining more than they were sitting.

After each speech, however, the boys had the chance to submit written questions to each speaker. There were many questions submitted, and, when the questions were read out loud, it was obvious that not only were the boys listening intently, but they had seriously reflected on what the speaker had said. It was as if each young man had the attitude, "I'm interested in this but I don't want anyone to know it."

Dr. Lowery compared this phenomenon to the "magic eye" charts that are popular in many newspapers. To see the hidden image in the chart, a person has to stare at the chart close up, then try to maintain their blurred vision as they move back from the image. They will see the hidden image

only if they can avoid refocusing their eyes on the chart.

With many teens, there is more happening than meets the eye, but it takes great trust for the parent to believe that the hidden reality is better than what the parent sees on the surface. The temptation is to scream at the child, "Listen to me when I'm talking to you!" This is not an effective way to get someone to listen.

Having had four of our children go through adolescence, I would wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Lowery's advice. Children of ours who seemed totally unresponsive to our advice several years ago now seem to have instant recall of what we told them. They not only remember it, but they seem to believe it. Moreover, they are advocates for the principles we have tried to instill in them and which they initially resisted.

So, if your nerves can hold up, assume that your teen is listening to you even if it looks like they're not. Pretend they are responding with interest and enthusiasm. It might help to imagine that what you are seeing is merely a shell that has swallowed your child. Even though you can't see him, your child is inside the shell and regards each syllable that comes from your mouth as a precious drop of the most delicious wisdom.

Our closing verse is from the Book of Sirach: "He who educates his son makes his enemy jealous, and shows his delight in him among his friends. At the father's death, he will seem not dead, since he leaves after him one like himself."