

Why your teen thinks "you don't understand"

By Kerri Sackville



If you want your teen to feel understood stop being so positive. *Photo: Getty*

"You don't understand," my fifteen year old son will say. He will have confided a problem – perhaps with schoolwork, perhaps with friends – and I will listen attentively, and then offer my words of wisdom. I feel I do understand, and that I can assist him with my advice.

But he disagrees. And his words slap me down like a physical blow. I feel helpless and I feel inadequate and, worst of all, I know I'm not helping my child. But why? What am I doing wrong?

Well, finally, I think I might just understand.

In her fascinating piece in *Daily Life*, writer Marianne Stenger discussed the limitations of 'positive thinking', and the place for negative talk in our interactions with others and ourselves.

For instance, if a friend has just been laid off at work, negative validation, such as "I'm so sorry to hear that, that is really stressful," might be more helpful than overly

optimistic words of encouragement like "Don't worry too much, I'm sure you'll find another job soon."

Because ... positive reframing could make your friend feel like you simply don't understand what they are facing.

When I reflect on my relationship with my teens, this advice is like the missing piece of the puzzle, the reason my son and daughter so often feel that I am simply missing the point.

As a parent, I can't bear to see my children in pain. And so when they are in pain, I try to talk them out of it, by encouraging them to look at the positive side of the situation.

For example, my thirteen year old daughter is finding herself drifting apart from a close friend – very common for girls just hitting their high school years. My instinct is to say to her, "Well, don't worry! You have tons of other friends to choose from!" I want to show her that it's really not so bad, and that in the scheme of things losing one friend is a hurt from which she will quickly and fully recover.

And my son, for instance, is highly academic and self-motivated, and is terribly anxious about his marks. He comes to me and expresses his fears, and I try to reassure him by telling him he'll do great, he always does. "You've studied hard, you'll do just fine, stop worrying!" I say.

But it doesn't work for either child, and I have never really understood why.

Now I do. Now I realise that my positive reframing is not helping them at all, because it is denying the validity of their experience. What's more, it is implying that they are wrong or inadequate to feel this way, and that if they had a better attitude, they wouldn't be hurting at all.

I need to be doing the exact opposite to win their trust, and to actually help my children. I need to acknowledge how bad they feel, so that they can be truly heard, and understood, and reassured that they are normal.

So in future I will say to my daughter, "Yes, I know how hard it is to lose a friend. You must be feeling really bad. I'm so sorry. I'm here for you," before I attempt to cheer her up or share my own experiences.

And I will recognise my son's anxiety, and allow him how to express his concerns. Perhaps we can discuss his fears, and explore what would happen if the worst occurred, and he did receive disappointing marks. Maybe it wouldn't be so devastating after all. Or maybe he would be upset for a while, then regroup and move on. Either way, I know now that it doesn't help to say 'She'll be right, mate', because that is not his truth, and all it will do is make him feel more lonely and anxious than before.

Parenting teens is a constant learning curve, and we all get it wrong at least as much as we get it right. But with this little insight, hopefully I can prove to my teens that I do understand.

Because all we all really want is to be understood.

Source; http://www.essentialkids.com.au/older-kids/teens/why-your-teen-thinks-you-dont-understand-20141007-10rfl.html#utm_source=FD&utm_medium=lifeandstylepuff&utm_campaign=positivetalk