

## The Father's Day Gift You Give Your Kids.

Remember those old TV shows where Dad would call Junior into the study for a man-to-man-talk?

“It was usually because the kid was in trouble,” laughs Russ Chandler of Portsmouth, Virginia. “Back when I was a kid that’s the way it was,” he says. “My father and I had what I’d call a good relationship but we never really talked about anything of major significance, not really.”

Things have changed for this generation of dads, says Chandler who now has three teenage sons of his own. “I know my boys pretty well. I definitely know them better than I was known as a boy.”

Do you wish you knew your son or daughter better? You’re going to have to listen, says Dr. Jim Longhurst, a psychologist with national children and family services charity Starr Commonwealth. And it starts with listening to *yourself*.

“Many times, we as parents rely so much on lecturing and telling our children what they should do,” Longhurst said. “We assume we know what motivated them to do something and jump right into the mode of correcting them and demanding change.”

Longhurst, who works with troubled teenagers at Starr’s residential treatment facilities in Michigan and Ohio, believes it’s a habit we as adults must learn to break. “Many of us had parents who only talked to us as children in this manner. They gave us orders and criticized us, so as we become adults, we naturally assume this way of interacting with our children – especially when we think they’re doing something wrong.”

A better direction, says Longhurst, and one he’s seen work again and again in the lives of disenfranchised teens, is to engage your child in true dialogue. It’s not as easy as it sounds, especially for dads who feel a need to be “the authority” in the conversation.

“We must work hard at resisting the urge to come up with a specific solution or result, and instead direct our focus on understanding how our kids think, and more importantly, feel about something,” he says. Need some pointers? Longhurst offers these:

- Resist the urge to change your child. By listening with the sole purpose of understanding, your child will more likely make changes on her own. Children don’t resist change; they resist **being** changed.
- Expand your capacity to experience the reality of your child. Do this by increasing your “pause response” and refraining from interrupting or formulating a response before your child has completed expressing their thoughts and feelings.

- Ask more questions for clarification and offer reflective statements. These promote your child's self exploration and coming up with their own ideas about solutions to problems.
- Your child's feelings are always valid. There are no **right** or **wrong** feelings,
- Slow down your experience of time. Relax. Enjoy the opportunity to sit back and learn from your child. Don't be in any hurry.
- Remember that a shared understanding between you and your child can be very powerful. When you have made it possible to listen and learn together with your child, you have given your child a most valuable gift.

Starr Commonwealth is a child and family services organization with nearly a century of experience in treating troubled youth and their families. For more information about Starr Commonwealth programs, including Montcalm School for Boys in Michigan or Montcalm School for Girls in Ohio, call 800-837-5591 or visit [www.starr.org](http://www.starr.org).