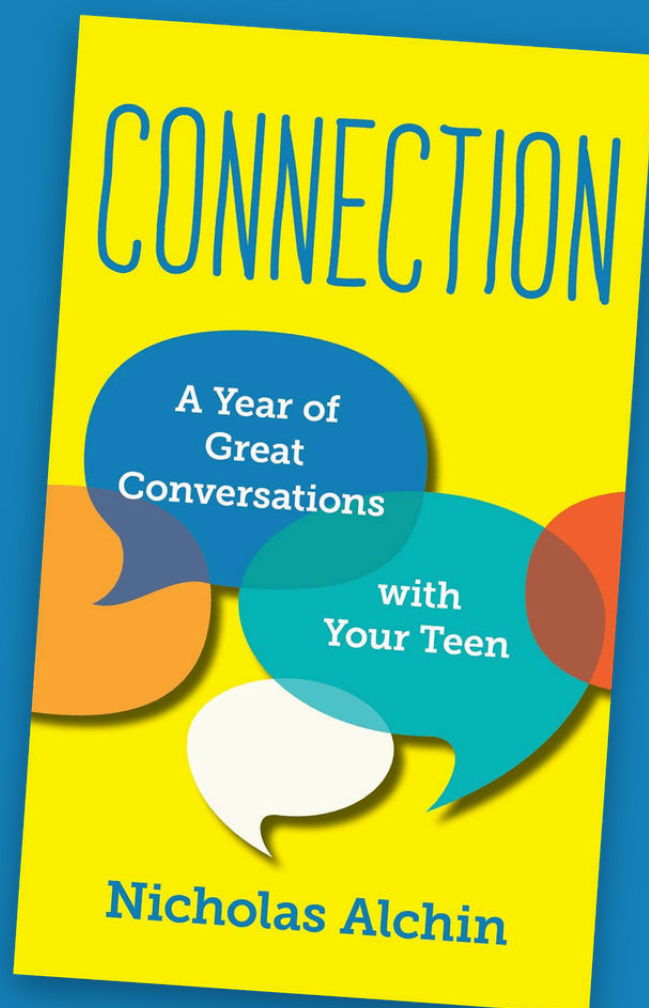


Talking with Teenagers

A note for parents

*Conversations that matter are often
hard to start, and easy to avoid.*

nickalchin.com/books/connection



A change you will probably notice

When our children are small, connection takes almost no effort. They sit on our laps, reach for our hands, and tell us everything, whether we asked or not. Bedtime stories and walks to the park make it natural – even easy.



“Fine.”

Then, somewhere around the start of secondary school, it can change. The physical closeness fades, friendships outside home begin to matter more, and we know less and less about what happens in their days. The child who once told you everything now says that school was “fine”, and conversations tend to end there. That doesn’t mean anything has gone wrong – it is how children grow towards independence, and it is meant to happen. But it does mean that the easy connection of the early years has to become something more deliberate.

It is also different now from how it was for our parents. We are expected to guide our children on purpose, stress, technology and their futures, and we often find we are asking ourselves the same questions. We cannot simply rely on our own childhoods as a guide, because the world our children are growing up in is a different one.



What I've seen

I've spent several decades in schools, and in that time I have watched a great many families work hard to stay close to their children through the teenage years. Most of the parents I have known have been loving, committed and thoughtful. Yet the same few patterns come up again and again, and I also recognise most of them in my own family and in myself.

-  **The question that feels like an interrogation.** We ask because we care. “What grade did you get in that test?” “Is she really the kind of friend you want?” “How long did you spend on your homework?” But a string of well-meant questions can feel, from the other side, like being questioned by the police. The child closes down, and we conclude they don't want to talk, when in fact all they don't want is an interrogation. *(More in Chapter 1, Dialogue, and Chapter 22, Attention.)*
-  **Solving the wrong problem.** When a Grade 9 student fails a Maths test, a parent's first instinct is often to go straight to the mark and where it leaves them in the class. But the ranking is not what matters. What matters is what the child now believes about themselves. Have they decided they are “not a Maths person”? Do they still think effort makes a difference? Have they learned the material, or only lost confidence in it? We can only find out once they feel we understand how it felt. *(More in Chapter 25, Confidence, and Chapter 39, Failure.)*
-  **Telling them what to do.** Every parent of a teenager knows the problem. Tell them to wear a coat and they'll leave it at home. Tell them to stay away from a particular friend and that friendship suddenly becomes more appealing. Direct instruction is the most natural thing in the world for a parent, but teenagers hear it as a challenge to their independence, and many will push back on principle, even against advice they privately agree with. (I know I did. Honestly, I sometimes still do.) What works better is respecting their growing need to decide for themselves, so that the good choice is one they get to make. *(More in Chapter 8, Influence, and Chapter 48, Autonomy.)*
-  **Worrying on their behalf.** Many teenagers worry for weeks about an exam that seems to matter for everything. Then they do well, sometimes better than they had hoped, and instead of relief, a new worry arrives: now they have to live up to the result. There is always something to worry about if you look hard enough, and our own anxiety for our children, however loving, can quietly add to theirs. *(More in Chapter 4, Stress, and Chapter 50, Wellbeing.)*

What helps instead

since feeling is first

e e cummings

When poet e e cummings wrote that “feeling is first” he was pointing to a truth that applies to our kids as much as us. For our children, it means they need to *feel* heard, not simply to *be* heard. If they don’t feel heard, it hardly matters whether they were, or how wise our advice may be. For those of us used to being in charge, at work or at home, listening can feel passive, almost a surrender of authority. It isn’t. Deep listening is how we come to know our children as they really are, not as we imagine or even want them to be. It tells them we are interested in who they are becoming. When we do offer direction, it lands because it comes from someone who knows them, and whom they trust.

We are also playing the long game. We don’t need every conversation to go well, and we don’t need to win every argument. Awkward silences and defensive replies are part of the process, not a sign of failure.

The book offers a way of thinking about this: conversations that move, gradually and at the child’s pace, from the everyday to the meaningful. Along the way it suggests a few simple habits that help: really attending, accepting and validating what we hear, paraphrasing it back, asking engaging questions, and being patient. None of them is complicated, though all of them take practice.

Attending,
accepting and
validating

Paraphrasing

Asking engaging
questions

Patience

What the book won’t do is hand you rules. Every family is different, and the aim is to help you find your own answers, and perhaps, along the way, some answers for yourself.

Before you start: some questions

We tend to leave conversations with our children to chance. They happen in the car, over dinner, in passing on the stairs, and we rarely stop to think about how they are going. Yet we would never treat anything else this important so casually. We plan for our children’s education and their health, and we think hard about our own work. Conversation deserves some of the same attention. So before anything else, it is worth pausing to ask two simple questions: where are you now, and what are you hoping for?

These questions are for you, not your children. You can think about them alone, or with someone else: a partner, or a friend who also has teenagers. If you do them together, think first on your own, and then share only as much as you want to. The point is to notice what is really happening in your conversations now, and how you would like them to be. It is also to see, through conversation, how other people view things differently, so that you can think more deeply and better understand your own experiences.

What do you notice now?

What do conversations with your teen look, sound and feel like today? Who does most of the talking, and what’s the tone? When are they easy, and when are they hard? Which subjects come up naturally, and which do you avoid?

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What are you hoping for?

What might be some of the ways you would like conversations with your teen to look, sound and feel, now and in the years to come?

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Parenting a teenager has a way of taking us back to our own teenage years. Psychologists talk about “ghosts in the nursery”, or even “angels in the nursery”: the echoes of how we ourselves were raised, both painful and loving, which can shape how we respond to our own children without our noticing. A slammed door or a dismissive shrug can suddenly bring back how it felt to be fourteen, and we find ourselves reacting not to our child but to our own past. That is why it helps to think these things through beforehand.

What tends to go wrong?

When a conversation goes badly, what might be some of the things you notice happening at the time, or just beforehand? How does the tone shift? What are some of the things you find yourself doing: asking, advising, correcting, reassuring, directing?

What did it feel like for you?

How do you remember it feeling when you spoke with your parents? As you think back to the conversations that stayed with you, why did some land well and others badly? What aspects would you like to retain for your conversations with your own children? And what would you do differently?

Thinking back like this can stir up more than we expect. Wanting a different relationship with our own children often means seeing our own parents a little differently too. I found I had a lot more time for my parents when I came to see them as fallible individuals doing their best, and it’s changed my relationship with them. And it’s also made me wonder how my kids see me, and how they will see me in years to come. It’s humbling, and it has given me a deeper sense of how much love and fallibility sit side by side in every family, including my own.



Praise for Connection

“A beautifully crafted system to help parents engage kids in critical thinking about the small decisions that will become their behavioral compass. At once empathetic, wise, and deeply practical, this is a must-read for parents and educators of teens.”

Julie Lythcott-Haims, *New York Times* bestselling author of *How to Raise an Adult*

“An essential guide for building family trust and having deeper, more effective conversations.”

Laurie Santos, Professor of Psychology at Yale University and host of *The Happiness Lab*

“My biggest mistake was not spending enough time with my children. It could have been avoided if only Nick Alchin had written this beautiful book a few decades ago. Current and future parents need not repeat it.”

Kishore Mahbubani, former Singapore Ambassador to the UN

“Communication is a craft. This guide is shot through with advice and examples that are deeply wise.”

Guy Claxton, Emeritus Professor of the Learning Sciences, University of Winchester

“By listening more deeply to our children, we not only help shape who they become, but are transformed ourselves. An inspiring, thought-provoking guide for any parent who wants to raise thoughtful, resilient young people and, in the process, become a better human being.”

Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, OECD

“This is the book all parents need right now. Nick Alchin has written the perfect blend of grounded meditation and actionable guide to connecting – or reconnecting – with our teens as they seek stability and direction in an uncertain world.”

Parag Khanna, author of *MOVE: Where People Are Going for a Better Future*

“Nick Alchin shows that parenting can be a source of deep reflection, and a period of human growth, not only for the child, but also for the parent.”

Olli-Pekka Heinonen, Director General, International Baccalaureate

“Neither an academic treatise nor a new age trope, this remarkable book is full of wisdom, wit and guidance for anyone – not just parents – wishing to hold constructive conversations with others – not just teenagers.”

Roger Sutcliffe, author of *Thinking Moves A–Z*

“A compelling read about the human side of parenting, with all our human faults.”

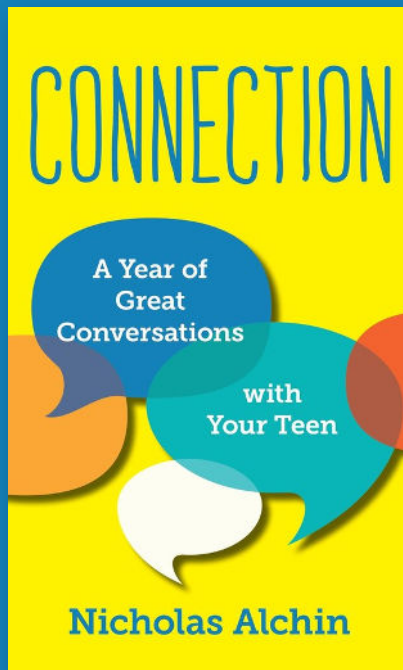
Jane Larsson, Executive Director, Council of International Schools

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The book



Connection has 52 short chapters, one for each week of the year, though you can read them in any order and at any pace. Each one begins with a story, explores the idea underneath it, and ends with possibilities for conversation at home. The chapters move through seven themes:

Deep Connection

The Parenting Stance

Identity and Values

Mental Wellbeing

Social Ethics

Future and Purpose

Modern Balance

Where to start:

Stress Why Your Teen Needs Struggle

Repair The Four Steps to Healing a Rift

School Why You Are Thinking About School All Wrong

Influence Why “Just Say No” Fails (and What to Say Instead)

Technology Being Human in an AI World

Where to pre-order

Connection is published by Bloomsbury in March 2027.

Click a bookseller to pre-order:

Bloomsbury

Amazon US

Amazon SG

Books-a-Million

Waterstones

Or find all the links at nickalchin.com/books/connection