

Being Heard by your teenager

Communicating
— without —
CONTROL
and
manipulation

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Intro

Bueller? Bueller? Ever felt like saying this to your teenager as you try and converse with them, and they seem not to even acknowledge your existence? As a parent of a teenager, I am sure you have experienced frustration in having even a simple conversation. Getting more than a one- or two-word answer from them seems to be nearly impossible. While most parents just accept this as the “teenage phase” as their adolescents are trying to assert themselves and figure out who they are, this can still feel absolutely maddening.

This “teenage phase” they seem to be going through may be something you have come to accept, while, at the same time, you still feel like you are a boiling tea kettle just waiting for the moment you start screaming! And when we as parents scream, the tendency is to assert whatever control and authority we can, in order to regain control of the situation. There’s gotta be a better way, right?!? Is this just the “teenage phase,” or is there something else going on?

A brief study on the relationship between the brain and communication shows that something else might be going on. *(The following is paraphrased from a seminar given by Ted Klontz, Ph.D.)*

We are each created with three parts to our brain:

Reptilian Brain - This is present from birth, and its purpose is to continually be scanning for danger and threats. It has automatic functions and never sleeps.

Mammalian Brain - This is typically developed by age 6-7. This part of the brain sends alerts to the Reptilian brain regarding what to do when potential danger/alerts come its way. This portion of the brain helps to calm us down. This is what we tap into when we are developing coping skills. This part of the brain is very *rationalizing* (our actions) but is not *rational*.

Neo-Cortex Brain - This begins to develop in later childhood and carries through to adolescence and adulthood. The purpose of this part of the brain is to modify and moderate impulse behaviors. This portion of the brain *believes* that it makes 90% of the daily decisions, but this is wrong.

The Reptilian and Mammalian parts of the brain allow our responses to get big in order to scare the threat away, or small in order to avoid the potential threat. Essentially these two portions of the brain are our default. This drives our behavior, our thoughts, our actions, and our responses to people in every situation without taking into consideration the Neo-Cortex portion of our brain, which helps us function as an adolescent and as an adult.

The greatest threat that the Reptilian and Mammalian parts of the brain are scanning for is the answer to the question,

“Do I belong?”

What research has found is that without people, we cannot survive. We were created for relationship.

As your child becomes a teenager and progresses toward adulthood, their natural desire for autonomy grows and shifts, as well. This isn't in an effort to be rebellious (at least, not consciously!); it's because the more we go through life, the more we are able to make choices, rationalize, decipher, and become a fully integrated person.

Do I Belong?

Everything we say on a day-to-day basis, in any situation, is said to get one of six needs met:

- Belonging
- Autonomy
- Safety/Security
- Self Expression
- Purpose/Significance
- Connection

Who is this alien that stands before me?!

You've made it through the terrible twos, the elementary years, and the early middle school years. And even though there were tough moments during those years, now tackling teenage-ism is an entirely different beast! Just when you thought you knew your kid and could predict their next move, *BAM!*--they became a teenager, and predictability is the antithesis of who stands before you.

That frustration you have in wondering if your teen thinks through their actions or words? Perfectly normal. In fact, when you are wondering what the heck your teen is doing or saying, they are probably wondering the same thing, too. Teens often don't know what they really think or feel, because almost on a daily basis, they are becoming a different person. Suffice it to say, your teen is probably just as frustrated as you are.

BUT, if you are aware of the specific ways your adolescent is changing, you are then able to take these changes into account as you interact with them.

• c h a n g e s •

Physical

Your teen is going through the process, literally, of being transformed from a child to an adult. It seems like almost overnight that your teen looks more like a grown-up than a kid. Body weight changes; voices deepen; body parts develop; hormones are all the rage; sexual characteristics emerge. All of a sudden, your child is living in a body that's ready for sex and babies! Yikes!

Social

The center of your teen's world begins to shift from family to their friends and peer group. Children seek out playmates; teens seek out meaningful relationships. School actually becomes "fun" because of the social atmosphere.

Intellectual

There are basic differences between the ways children think and the ways adults think. Adolescence is a time for your teen to begin wrestling through beliefs and values, a time for becoming more confident in likes and dislikes. And they move into a place of figuring out their independence while still being dependent on their parents. Adolescents begin to use abstract reasoning; they can be logical, persuasive, manipulative, and even right.

Psycho-Emotional

"Emotional rollercoaster" may not even begin to accurately describe the pendulum swing of your teen's emotions. While these changes are usually a result of changes taking place elsewhere (physically, socially, etc.), the moodiness may just be a bit more tolerable. It is during this time that your adolescent is establishing their own identity, developing the ability to reciprocate relationships, and learning to self-motivate to set goals and have direction in life.

Yeah, yeah, yeah . . .

I can imagine that you are saying to yourself, "This is all well and good, but it doesn't necessarily help me in how I communicate with my kid! It doesn't take away the fact that they don't do what I want, and sometimes I feel like pulling my hair out . . . or grounding them for life!" Fear not! That's what the rest of this book is all about--how to help you as the parent communicate and be heard by your teenager without using control and manipulation.

First things first. If the title of this book, "Being Heard by Your Teenager: Communicating Without Control and Manipulation," stuck out to you, we need to be clear about one thing: *you, as the parent, are the primary party at fault for doing the controlling and manipulating.* Now, before you write me off completely, give me a chance to explain.

In order to be heard by your child--to truly communicate with them--, you need to have a relationship with them. I'm not talking about a relationship in which the "because I told you so" card is pulled in explanation to your every decision, or a relationship where you "train" them to do as you say as long as they live under your roof. I'm talking about a relationship based on knowing your child, demonstrating **empathy**, and seeking to understand them as they grow and change (even when it feels impossible to understand).

Em·pa·thy [em-puh-thee]

1. (Noun) the intellectual identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another

Having a relationship with your teenager means *seeing them*--looking past their behaviors and looking at their heart. Most often a teenager's interactions with you and others are a reflection of heart issues rather than outright maliciousness or rebellion. It is our job as parents to find ways to get along with our teens, invest in them, join with them.

Start experiencing the relationship rather than trying to make it happen.

What does empathy look like in relationship to your teen?

It means:

- Being willing to put yourself in their place
- Seeing things through their eyes
- Offering grace rather than a lecture
- Putting your experiences on the back burner
- Letting go of your opinions and preferences in order to make room for understanding their experiences
- Asking yourself, "If I were them, how would I feel in this situation?"
- Listening to the feelings and underlying messages rather than just what your teen is verbally or physically expressing

A close friend of mine shared with me one day that she had hired her 15-year-old son to babysit her 10-year-old son one afternoon, only to find out, upon returning home, that the 15-year-old had been smoking marijuana in the house while babysitting! My friend was outraged and was tempted, as we all are, to pull the plug on everything--no cell phone, no friends, no media, no activities--no nothing! And while most parents would have found a punishment like this to be more than justified, she chose to take a step back and look at the situation in a different way. Instead of running through the list of consequences, she decided that this behavior was more of a reflection of her son's heart. And in this, her entire approach to the situation changed.

While her son did indeed have consequences for his actions (including paying her back the money she had paid him for babysitting and also being grounded for two weeks), she used this opportunity to get to know her son by spending time with him, conversing with him, and creating a safe place for him to ask questions, talk about pressures, and express concern and frustration with what was going on in his life. While the trust between her and her son was, at the very least, impaired, she used this opportunity to give the son opportunities to rebuild his trustworthiness.

You may be wondering how empathy and control and manipulation might correlate; they seem pretty opposite, right? Well, they are! So how do you check yourself to know if you are controlling and manipulating a conversation with your teen or if you are communicating with empathy and understanding?

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

What is your personal preference in this situation? Is your preference different than your teen's, which is making it hard to exercise understanding?

Are you wanting to be right? "But I'm the parent!" Yes, you are . . . but you're human, too. Are you willing to sacrifice your relationship with your teen for the sake of trying to be right?

Is your teen about to make the same decision or mistake that you might have made when you were a teenager? Are you making rules around the situation to avoid them repeating your own failure?

Are you simply unfamiliar with what your teen is wanting to do, the concept they are trying to convey, the object/person with whom they are showing interest? Oftentimes, it's easy to write the unfamiliar off as "bad" or "wrong" and a reason to find your teen's desire as "unacceptable."

What do you want most for your teen?

I am a firm believer that almost all parents want the best for their kids. It is highly unlikely that a parent tries to make life unbearable for their teen or acts in ways that are intentionally malicious. But I do believe that many parents are afraid of one common thing: failure. I propose a new definition of failure--

Failure: neglecting what we want MOST for what we want RIGHT NOW

So take a minute . . . Think about it . . . What do you want most for your teen? I bet if I were to take a poll of parents across the country, spanning diverse ethnicities, periods in history, religious affiliations, and personal preference, parents would generally say that they desire for their teens to grow up into well-rounded individuals who are able to take care of themselves, think on their own, love others, pursue and achieve goals, and maybe even have a family of their own some day. These are all great things to desire for your children! So how do we fail as parents, then, when we are using control and manipulation in order to communicate to our teen? Saying "yes" to the anxious need to make your children obey by whatever means necessary is actually saying "no" to what you really want most with your kids--a mutually respectful relationship that leads your kids to voluntarily seek out your influence.

Time to Reflect . . .

When you are in a situation with your teen where you notice your tendency to control or manipulate the situation, take a step back and start to notice what it is about this pattern that means so much. What bothers you so much about it? Why does this mean so much to you, so much that you are allowing it to drive you crazy?

What do you want? What in this situation do you most want to see happen? What is your ultimate goal? What is the end you have in mind, the end that is most reflective of your highest hopes and deepest desires? *This is such a VITAL question, because it is the best way to discern your next move!*

Reflecting on these two topics can be revolutionary when you are seeking to be heard and communicate with empathy and understanding with your teen.

Practice makes perfect.

So, now that you have had some time to think about what you want most for your teen and your relationship with them, it's time to actually put this into practice.

At the beginning of this book, we talked about the different parts of the brain and how the bottom 2/3 of the brain are constantly scanning for danger, trying to answer the question, "Do I belong?". Think about even the way your teen dresses . . . Some days he/she is dressed as a jock, others a hipster, some days goth/emo, and the list goes on and on. As teens strive toward autonomy, the different masks they wear (e.g. clothing styles) help to answer that "Do I belong?" question. Adolescents are at a very sensitive place physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually; their Reptilian and Mammalian brains are on full alert, and this is where you as parents come in.

Make big deals out of big deals. It's easy to nitpick, to find fault in little things, or to blow up over minor issues. As your teenagers search for autonomy and belonging, you can help them by being mindful of your tendency to control and manipulate.

Decide in advance what are the "big deals," such as family rules, values, traditions, and expectations that are non-negotiables. Communicate this to your teen and make these the "big deals."

Basically, *don't cry over spilled milk*. Your teen is going to make mistakes, and they are going to say things you don't like, but if World War III happens every time they say something inappropriate, they slowly learn to distance themselves and tune out the words you are saying.

Establish boundaries. This is a touchy subject, because most people believe that boundaries are a checklist of things you can and cannot do or say, etc. However, I propose that boundaries are much different.

Boundaries represent safety and are flexible.

While I know this is far-fetched, imagine that you live in a neighborhood where the neighbors on all sides of you raise alligators that are allowed to roam free in their backyard. What's the most natural thing to do? Build a fence. And what is the fence for? It indicates to your children the area of safety in which they can play. They can learn that there is freedom to enjoy, play, laugh, and live within the safety of the fence boundary. It's not because you want to confine your children to your yard; it's because, if they play outside the confines of the fence, there is a chance they will get eaten by an alligator!

Boundaries with your teens? What it's *not* is an exhausting list of rules that they must abide by. Rather, I would propose that they are “fences” that you discuss with your teens regarding places they can go, people they can spend time with, what's considered appropriate/inappropriate activity in relationships, and the like. This falls under the umbrella of keeping your teens safe rather than grading their performance based on a list of rules.

But here is the real catch:

Boundaries are malleable.

As your teen grows,
 matures,
 establishes trust,
 and demonstrates responsibility,
 it is appropriate for these boundaries to grow.

Essentially, the area of safety for them to “play in” enlarges.

Teach your kids *how* to think versus *what* to think.

I can say that this is one of the toughest areas for a parent to relinquish control (and manipulation). To give your children freedom to make choices that might be contrary to your preference is difficult to do. I'm sure you have heard horror stories of children who, the moment they were away from their parents, went off to college, or moved out on their own, threw caution to the wind and engaged in every activity that was "forbidden" during their growing-up years. You might have even been that teen yourself! It's tempting to think that the way to avoid this happening is by having more rules, more control, more manipulation, and the threat of "bad things happening to you." However, the contrary is true. When we do that, we are teaching our children *what* to think. And it is in our nature as humans to resist being controlled (told what to do, what to think, etc.). So it would make sense that the very things you have so adamantly forbidden your teen from doing are the very things they will run to as soon as they are out from underneath your roof. Why? Because they want to prove that they are not mastered by anyone and that they can do whatever they want.

The good news? I believe there is a way that we can help avoid this. And that is simply by teaching our children how to think (rather than what to think). Teaching your teens how to think involves the following:

Teach them critical thinking skills; ask them to logically process through their choices, decisions, and relationships rather than pre-determining their outcome.

Give them the freedom to respectfully challenge why you (as a parent) react certain ways, believe certain things, or live out certain values.

Don't "freak out" when they ask questions that may suggest they doubt some of the beliefs and values your family holds to tightly.

Ask them questions about how they arrived at their conclusion; ask them to explain their thought process.

Validate and affirm that they are thinking things through in a responsible and safe way.

Ask follow-up questions (e.g. "If you decide to do _____, and the outcome is different than you are assuming it will be, how might you handle it?")

For those of you who have read anything else that I've written, you know my love for the TV series, "Parenthood." If you haven't watched it, I suggest you do; it is chock-full of realistic examples (surprisingly, not Hollywood-glamorized) of dealing with a plethora of family dynamics.

In this example, the scene is set as Adam and Kristina Braverman's oldest child, Haddie (age 16), brings a young man, Alex (age 19), to dinner. While Adam and Kristina really like Alex and admire his respect for Haddie and the family, they are concerned with his past and ultimately decide that Haddie is not allowed to date him. After telling Haddie their verdict, she immediately throws a tantrum and continues seeing Alex behind her parents' backs. As you might expect, Adam and Kristina eventually find out and, to make a long story short, have to have some very tough conversations between themselves (as parents) and eventually with Haddie in order to come to a favorable compromise for the situation.

Ultimately what Adam and Kristina recognized was that their daughter was growing up and that at some point they needed to learn to trust her and demonstrate their trust in her by allowing her to participate in activities and relationships that would allow her opportunities to reflect her responsibility and maturity. They affirmed the qualities they saw in her, shared their concerns for the relationship, and communicated with her as a young adult. The three of them agreed on guidelines (essentially, boundaries) surrounding what was appropriate for this relationship as well as the communication that was expected with the parents. Then they went a step further by recognizing that Haddie would make mistakes, and while there would be consequences for her mistakes, they were not interested in holding the relationship over her head in order to manipulate her into doing what they wanted. On top of that, they requested that Haddie be open with them, even with awkward conversations and decisions that they may not like, in an effort to continue to maintain an open and influential relationship with their daughter.

Brilliant. (And if you watch the series, you will see how these boundaries, guidelines, and communication play out. It's pretty cool!)

The Nitty Gritty

This is all about practicality, so let's get down and dirty as we continue figuring out how to communicate without control or manipulation.

Hot Buttons. Let's be honest. You know your teen's hot buttons, so don't push them (even when they push yours). I know, I know, sometimes it is just so gratifying to get that dig in, to play the "Because I said so" card (More about that later.) . . . But, my parenting friend, resist! When you push their hot buttons to get a reaction or to get your point across, you are resorting to control and manipulation. The walls go up; communication goes down; and no one wins!

Be Unpredictable. To the degree that your teens can predict you, they will dismiss you. Your teens come to expect the answer they are going to receive from you; essentially, when they come to you with a request, their defenses are already up, and they have the big guns waiting on stand-by (e.g. a tantrum, a slew of statements indicating their hatred and disgust, whining statements about how unfair you are, etc.), and they know how to wear you down. Yes, unfortunately, they practice control and manipulation, too. So instead of going through the front door with predictability, what about trying the back door?

Check out this example:

Front Door: "Youth group is a non-negotiable. You will be a part of youth group as long as you are living under my roof. End of story."

Back Door: "That's fine. You don't have to go to youth group anymore. You can choose between youth group, Young Life, FCA, or a small group. Whichever you choose will be fine with us."

Unpredictable. Wise

You are their parent, *not* their friend.

In theory, this is an obvious concept. But when it comes down to it, this can be difficult to actually live out. We want our teens to like us. We would love to be the cool parents; we want to be the parents that every kid wishes their parents were like. But your child isn't looking for a best friend; they are looking for a parent who is going to help guide them, keep them safe, care for them, and desire the best for them. How does this happen? Here are a few suggestions:

Be confident. Sure, your kids might roll their eyes, scream at you, or tell you they wish they had other parents, but deep down, it's highly unlikely they actually mean it. When you implement a consequence, enforce a boundary, say no, or even say yes, be confident in your choice.

Don't react to them; respond to the situation.

(Don't worry, you have time later to cry, scream into a pillow, or go to a therapy session. But in the moment, do your best to maintain your confidence.)

Think ahead. You were a teen once, too. Remember what it was like and use that to expect what is coming. Think about how you might handle certain situations and conversations. Have a plan!

Make the punishment fit the crime. This goes along with boundaries, making a big deal out of a big deal, and all that we have talked about so far. If your teen requires a consequence, make it reasonable, intentional, and realistic.

Stay up-to-date on their world.

This may seem like an odd task in regard to non-controlling and non-manipulative communication, but this simple (Okay, it's not *that* simple.) task can do amazing things in your teens' hearing you. Be aware of what's going on in their world. You're no dummy; you know that how they are growing up now is different than how you did. But become educated on it! Here are some things you might consider educating yourself on:



Music, Movies, and TV - When you know what your teen is watching or listening to, beyond just the title or premise, you are showing them that you are taking interest in what they are interested in. And if you deem it to be inappropriate, your opinion holds more stock because you have taken the time to research/watch/listen before making up your mind.



Pop Culture - Who are the celebrities and athletes that your teen is talking about and looking up to? Know about them; research them; talk to your teens about them. This is a great way not only to engage them in conversation but also to let them know that you care about the things and people they care about.



Fashion - While this is an area that is ever-changing and you, no doubt, have opinions on, concerning what is appropriate and inappropriate--knowing what teens are wearing today and allowing your teens to wear clothes that you don't like (as long as they fit into your family's standard of appropriate attire) helps your teen gain autonomy and a sense of self.

Consider privileges rather than rules.

Every time you tell your teen, "You can't . . . ," their tendency is to resist you and do the opposite of what you said. So rather than having a list of rules, what if you and your teen sat down together and came up with privileges they can partake in, given they are abiding in the guidelines that you set together?

Around Christmastime last year, an article surfaced on Facebook and on national news about the guidelines a mother gave her son when she gave him an iPhone for Christmas. Essentially it was a contract outlining the expectations and responsibilities that were to be demonstrated while using this privilege. What's unique is that the mother gained the son's participation in this by setting up a contract with him, in which she enlisted his help to come up with the rules and the consequences. What a novel concept! Include your teens on the expectations surrounding their privileges and the consequences they will face if they are irresponsible with each privilege.

Having your teen participate in this gives them the ability to choose. They know the expectation/privilege and the consequence for not abiding. Should they choose to disregard the expectation, they have indicated that they have, instead, chosen the consequence. In order for this to work, however, expectations and consequences must not only be discussed up front, but you also must include your teen in the process.

Because I Told You So...

We've all said it. We've all had it said to us. It still sends shivers down my spine when I think about asking my parents, "Why?" and the answer being

"Because I told you so!"

Talk about wanting to buck the system even more! But are there times when this response actually might be appropriate? I argue that, yes, there are times, but they are few and far between. Up until this point, we have discussed many methods of handling communication with your teen that allow you to be heard rather than having them feel controlled and manipulated by you. But there are those rare moments where the "parent card" must be pulled, even if your teen doesn't understand.

In my mind, there are two situations in which this "parent card" is appropriate:

Illegal Behavior - If your teen or their friends are engaging in illegal behavior, it is appropriate to require your teen to cease all forms of contact with said individuals, *because you told them to*.

Dangerous Individuals - If your teen is engaging in relationships with dangerous individuals (not just individuals you don't care for), it is appropriate to require your teen to cease all forms of communication with said individuals, *because you told them to*.

This being said, after these illegal behaviors and dangerous relationships are dissolved, it is important to discuss with your teens *why* you created such requirements and processes through the situations with them. Allow them explanations and conversations in order to better understand where you are coming from on the matter.

They are always going to be your child.

I don't want to end this book without reiterating that I know you love your teen so much! I don't think you would be reading this book if you didn't. I trust, with all my heart, that your intentions are good and that you are striving to be the best parent possible. This person who has gone from a child to an adult in a matter of days/weeks/months is always going to be your child, your baby. I get that! And while this is true, and your love for them never has to fade, there are a few things that I want to leave you with in regard to how to best support your teen.

Be their biggest fan. We talked in the beginning about how much your adolescent is changing; during this time in life, nothing stays the same, and everything is awkward. They might feel like not a soul in the world cares about them. But that's where you get to prove them wrong. When the whole world is against them, telling them they need to be "more this" or "less that," you get to be someone who is for them and accepts them just the way they are. Let them know in meaningful ways how proud you are of them. Know the details of their life and catch them in moments where they are not sure what to do and tell them how awesome they are and how proud you are to be their parent.

Spend time with your teen in meaningful ways. Yes, this involves getting out of your comfort zone. Yes, this involves listening to music that you really can't stand. Yes, this involves watching YouTube videos, going to teenybopper stores, and taking millions of pictures for your teen to Instagram. (By the way, if you don't know what Instagram is, you need to become educated!) Yes, it involves spending time with them in ways that you might not find meaningful or productive. But you never know how much of an impact that has on your child.

*When they know that you choose them and are for them,
they learn that you are a safe person with whom they want to talk!*

Reach out to third parties. We can't do this alone. Sometimes we are just flat out of energy or are going through a rough period ourselves. That's where others come in. One of the greatest things you can do for your teen is to give them a network of safe people (preferably people that are older than they are) who can encourage, support, and challenge them (and who are probably saying the exact same things you are).

One of the most special moments of my life came several years ago when I received a call from a mother whose children I had babysat for several years. Her oldest daughter was just entering into her teen years, and her two younger daughters were also quickly growing up. Lorna informed me that she and her husband had sat down with their girls a few nights before and let them know that there were things that they understood the girls would want to talk about that they might not feel comfortable talking about with their parents. Lorna admitted that while she wished her girls would feel comfortable talking to her about everything, she knew it wasn't realistic. So instead of holding it against her daughters that they didn't feel comfortable talking to their parents, they created a list of safe individuals that both the girls and the parents approved of, whom the girls could call at any time for help, support, encouragement, or to be challenged. I had the privilege of being one of the people on that list. And to this day, many years later and hundreds of miles apart, I still get phone calls from each of those girls as they go through middle school and high school. It is truly an honor.

It might sound overwhelming to figure out just who could connect with your child in such a way that makes them and you feel safe and whose advice is in line with your family's values.

So a few ideas might be:

Youth Leaders or Pastors - Typically, if you are involved in a church, there are programs and designated adults to work with youth. These are usually individuals who are trained and excited to develop relationships with your teen.

Mentors, Coaches, Big Brother/Big Sister - Oftentimes, communities have programs that families can enroll in that provide mentors to their children. Schools may have programs, as well, and if your teen is involved in athletics, coaches will often take on the roll of safe adults to help guide your teen.

Therapists or Counselors - This could be for you or your teen. Oftentimes, teens and parents both need an outside perspective to process through the challenges of life and family dynamics. Meeting with a therapist is a safe and confidential way to do this, and if you see a therapist who specializes in working with families, often they will provide opportunities and skills in and out of sessions to build positive communication and relationships between family members.

It's about their heart. Yes, I know I have said this a lot, but I am going to say it one more time . . . When you are looking to be heard by your child, the best way to do it is to care about their heart. See them as the beautiful individual they are. Build their trust. Give them opportunities to succeed and accept them and love them when they make mistakes (because they will!).

Want to know more?

- *Boundaries with Teens* by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend
- *Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbinger Institute
- *ScreamFree Parenting:*
The Revolutionary Approach to Raising Your Kids by Keeping Your Cool by Hal Runkel
- *The Back Door to Your Teen's Heart:*
Learning What They Need and Helping Them Find It by Melissa Trevathan and Sissy Goff