

**THE 3 KEYS *of* EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION WITH TEENS**

Justin Young

"This is an excellent easy read for anyone who raises, works with, or has a role in the lives of young people. A good starter book for understanding the devastating, elusive issue of low self-esteem that controls and often ruins lives and relationships."

Marilyn J. Sorensen, Clinical Psychologist, Author, and National Speaker
www.GetEsteem.com

"Justin spoke to us in so many ways. He was able to talk with us in such a positive manor about such a negative subject. He explained the right thing to do and quickly turned anger to empathy."

- Cassie, a parent of a teenager at Rainbow Lake Middle School, SC

"Justin knows exactly how to talk to people & present it in a *way that they will listen*; he really connects with everyone."

Paul, High School student, VA

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Smashwords Edition

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*This book is dedicated to my parents who have been my #1 fans and supporters since day one...
and who let me use their office to write stuff.*

AUTHOR BIO



Justin became a professional performer in the entertainment industry when he was only 10 years old.

Recently, he has lent his voice as an announcer/actor to companies such as ESPN, Hardees, Piccadilly Café, Sonic, Liberty Tax, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, PODS Moving and Storage, Monster Energy Drink, Busch Gardens Howl-O-Scream as well as narrations for Fortune 100 corporate presentations, and even voices on video games.

Justin is a published singer/songwriter, and released his latest album, Clean Slate, in 2012. He was also the Musical Director for Disney's national pre-release theatrical production of The Little Mermaid.

As founder of The Pink Shoe Hero Foundation, Justin has become a nationally recognized motivational Youth speaker and teen success coach.

Through decades of experience, and years of study, Justin's message of self-acceptance and being true to one's self has resonated with teens in every community.

Justin currently resides in Virginia with his wife and children.

To learn more about Justin, his Tools For Teens and Parents, and watch a free demo of his presentation for teens, visit www.NationalSchoolSpeaker.com

Interested in Justin's Music? Visit his YouTube channel at www.YouTube.com/JustinYoungMusic.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is perhaps the most complicated period of one's life.

You remember what it was like, right? Awful!

Although adulthood can be pretty complicated too, nothing can match the adjustments that we have to make during this period of "growing up."

In addition to the stress of physical and hormonal changes in the body— zits, body odor, hair in new and unusual places... you know, the usual – adolescents are coping with changes in their social interaction with people.

This is also the time when they will experience emotional changes. This is the time when most will become aware of the opposite sex and maybe fall in "puppy" love.

In this period of great change and upheaval, of scattered energies and differing emotions, a teenager's self-esteem becomes vulnerable. Very vulnerable.

This is why it is important to help a teen develop their self-esteem further during this period. I say "further" because the foundation of teen-esteem is laid when they are very young.

Self-esteem, very simply defined, is how one views him or herself. It is the engine behind every choice one makes in life.

Think about it:

- Will a person make the choices required for success if they don't feel worthy enough to deserve it? If they don't believe they're competent enough to hold onto it?
- Will a student make the effort to get A's if they don't believe they're capable of being an A student?
- What does a relationship look like for the student who doesn't believe they're lovable?
- Would a student bully if they truly loved themselves for who they are, respected themselves, and understood their own self-worth? No. Of course not, because they would no longer have the need to pull others down to lift themselves up.

In this mini-ebook, I'm going to give you the Three Keys of Effective Communication that every adult must use to begin building relationships of trust with teens, and ultimately help them build, or re-build their own self-esteem.

We're all adults here. I value your time so I'm going to give it to you straight without any sugar. This is a serious topic, and although I do like to use humor, I'm going to be quite candid about the reality of what we're doing right... and what we're doing wrong.

If you are easily offended, then I ask you to turn your mind to this quote. It is a quote by a very wise person. Who that person is, I don't know. Someone just posted a meme on Facebook and I really liked it.

“The only way someone can offend us, is if we let them.”

I'm not going to talk to you like I talk to students. In my travels, one thing I've learned is this:

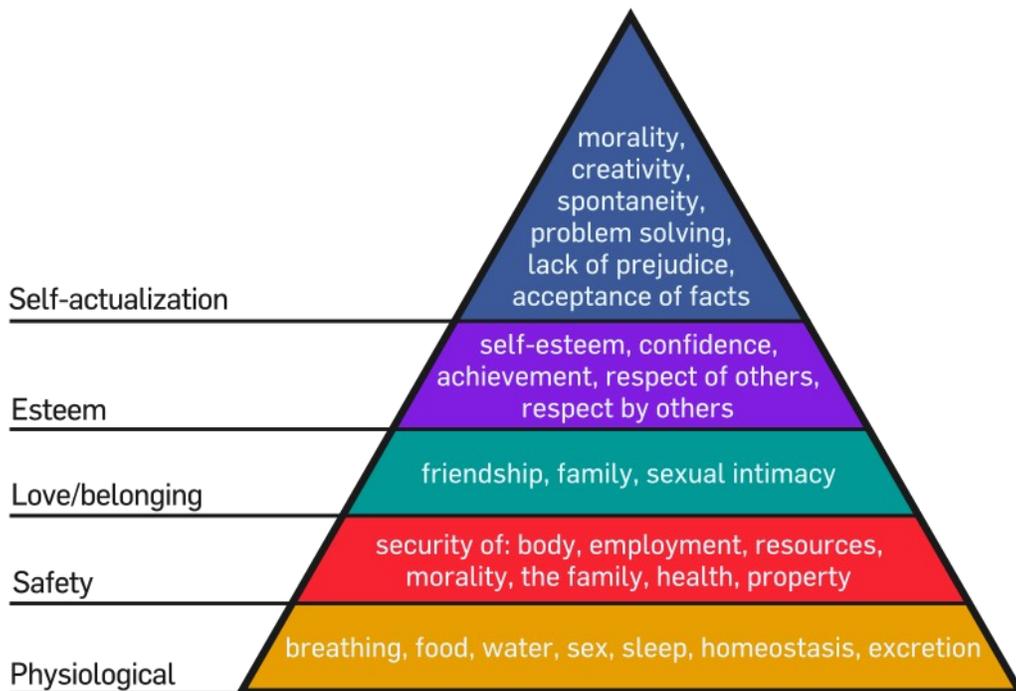
To motivate a student to change, you need tap their emotions to *stir* them to action. Adults are more cemented in their ways and tend to require more of a *shaking* to break through.

So prepare to be *shaken, not stirred!* (Sorry...couldn't help myself.)

CHAPTER 1

MASLOW'S MOUNTAIN

You may have heard of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see pyramid). In a nutshell, if we are to ever to ascend to the summit of our true potential, and live a happy and fulfilling life (self-actualization), we must first provide ourselves the basic needs of, as Maslow puts it, Esteem, Love/belonging, Safety, and Physiological.



One of our most primary needs is ACCEPTANCE. It falls into the “Love/Belonging” and “Esteem” categories.

Acceptance is never more important than during the childhood, teen and preteen years – especially when they are clamoring, ever so awkwardly, toward adulthood and on their way to the summit of self-actualization (their true potential).

Many of us believe the basic need of Acceptance can only be supplied by others. That it is something that comes *to* us, and something others must provide *for* us.

“BZZZZZZZZT!” Wrong! Or, in the words of Alex Trebek, “Oooooo...sorry.”

One thing I stress to teens as I travel across the country, and in coaching sessions, is that if they spend their time expecting other people to make them happy, they'll never be happy.

The same thing is true with Acceptance.

The person who should be the most accepting of you... is *you*.

Why do you think teens make so many *stupid* decisions? Even adults for that matter?

When people are hungry for acceptance and seek after validation, they make choices that they wouldn't normally make. They believe that by acting a certain way it will help them to be noticed and accepted by the person or group they're trying to impress.

Why do you think...?:

- kids get involved in gangs
- there is a bullying epidemic in schools across our nations
- teen pregnancies are in the 100's of thousands each year
- 16% of teens have seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months
- 50% of 12th graders and 20% of 8th graders use alcohol as their drug of choice
- over 3 million students fail to graduate each year

...and on and on.

The subject of self-esteem, self-acceptance, and self-confidence is actually very complex and rather deep. It plays a bigger role in our day-to-day decisions than most of us realize. And this mini-ebook is, by no means, a comprehensive report on the subject.

In order to effectively communicate with a teen, you need to understand what's going through their head and their heart. So in the next few short chapters, I am going to dig a little deeper to give you a better understanding of how crucial self-esteem and self-acceptance are as it relates to a teen's perception of life and the choices they make.

Then, I will finally delve into the Three Keys every adult must begin using, right now - be they a parent, teacher, or administrator - in order to improve communication, discipline, and ultimately, the feelings of self-worth within your average teenager.

If you want to build a strong foundation of self-esteem and confidence, the Three Keys, or principles, I'm going to give should actually be applied from the very beginning of toddler-hood.

CHAPTER 2

WHY LISTEN TO ME?

Why should you take my advice?

Well, that answer is very simple: Because I'm right. At least until someone proves me wrong – which my wife seems to do on a fairly regular basis.

But on this, I am right.

As an adult, I came to realize that my low self-esteem, in many areas of my life, was keeping me from the success I had always dreamed of as a child. It was having a negative effect on my family and our future. So I had to fix it.

Studying all the boring dissertations and books on the subject was not enough. I had to delve into the most intimidating textbook of them all: *The Book of Me*. If I was going to fix me, I had to honestly study me.

I was raised by a parent who suffered from severe low self-esteem and clinical depression. I have witnessed low-self-esteem utterly destroy loved ones in the form of eating disorders, addiction, and other self-destructive behaviors.

I suffered from the unforgiving repercussions of low self-esteem so much so that I made two attempts at taking my own life when I was a teenager.

I remember vividly what it was like to be a teenager with an identity crisis. A teenager who was everything on the outside, but hollow on the inside. A teen who tried so hard to be accepted by everybody, to be liked by everybody, to be all things to all people, who would selectively hide pieces of himself depending on the group he was with.

Any of these sound familiar to you?

The pieces of myself I could not hide, I was either bullied or admired for. Even put down by teachers if you can believe that. I was so inconsistent with my own sense of identity that it made me a follower and took me down roads of confusion, depression and self-loathing that ultimately led to self-destructive behaviors.

To see me, in the prime of my youth, you would have seen a young man on top of the world, accepted, loved and respected by so many. But what you would *not* have seen was a young man who was conflicted, wanting to be accepted for who he was on one hand, but too afraid to be himself on the other. Where the slightest embarrassing mistake was a devastating blow; and the slightest physical defect was a mark of shame.

I was never truly happy, only truly guarded. All I wanted was true acceptance from others, when what I really needed was true acceptance from myself. That would have changed everything.

When I look back, I find that the only times I sincerely enjoyed life, was when I let my guard down and didn't care what anyone else thought.

There are two instances in particular that I recall.

Instance One – ‘Ello, gov’nah!

I was 17, finishing up my junior year of high school when my mom ran into the kitchen and shouted, *"This is it! This is our trip to England!"*

In my mom's hand was that year's tax return; and it was enough to fly the four of us to the U.K. for a family vacation.

It was my first time to England. The plan was to stay in London for a few days then rent a car and venture out into the countryside to see all the historic sights, visit friends of my parents, hopping from one bed and breakfast to another.

During our stay, I did my best not to look like a tourist. How embarrassing. Tourists are so not cool. And I... was cool. So cool that even though I was excited to see all the sights and experience all the sounds – like travelling on the London Underground, seeing the medieval castles, going to the theatre district, the varieties of people and street performers at Piccadilly Circus -- I did my best to walk around like, *"Eh, I've seen it all before. I come here all the time. I eat fish and chips every morning for breakfast. I know what I'm doing. Move along."*

While touring one of the English castles, I tried so hard to fit in that when this pretty, red-headed lady came up to me and asked if I knew where the bathroom was, I put on my best British accent and said *"Top of the road and to the left."*

What the heck was I doing? Who'd I think I was, Bert from Marry Poppins? I was so conflicted -- a tourist on the inside, but playing a local on the outside.

Again, I was miserable. Sure, I liked being there, but I didn't enjoy it because I was so preoccupied with making sure everyone thought I wasn't a real tourist.

Then Scotland happened.

Many of my forefathers... and foremothers, foresisters, forebrothers, foreaunts and uncles... came from Scotland. Which could explain why, when we crossed the border from England into Scotland, I had the oddest sensation come over me. I felt like I was home.

I never mentioned it, 'cause, you know, I was too cool to have mushy feelings like that. Right?

Anyway, one of the coolest castle ruins we went to was Dunnottar Castle in Scotland. The ruins were so awesome, that I couldn't help but ask for the camera to start taking pictures. I started taking pictures of the castle, then pictures of my sister, then pictures of me.

Then I started exploring and imagining what it would have been like to live there, and fight there. I started thinking how cool this location would be for a movie, all the while taking pictures.

When we left the castle to head back to the car, I was riding high. For the first time during the entire trip, I was beginning to have fun. During the walk back to the car there was a ping-pong match going on in my mind:

Be cool, be miserable. Be a tourist, be happy. Cool, miserable. Tourist, happy. Pretend to be cool, people will "respect me." Be real and a tourist, people will laugh at me. Be fake, people will accept me. Be myself, people will reject me. Fake, miserable. Myself, happy. Cool. Nerdy. Accepted. Rejected. Aaaaaaaaaaarrgh!

We got close to the car, my dad went over to get some maps and info at a tourist stand and as I bent down -- I can still remember this as clear as day -- as I bent down to tie my shoe on a spot of mulch near the parking lot, I made my decision:

"Dang it, I'm a tourist! So I'm gonna act like a tourist!"

When I stood up, I was a new man. Well, a new young man, anyway. And for 17 years old, it was one of the smartest decisions I ever made.

After that decision to embrace my inner-nerd, the tourist I was, I stopped caring about what I looked like to others. It didn't even cross my mind. Every place we visited was more exciting and mysterious than before; every plate of local cuisine was more intriguing and delicious; every hillside covered in blooming heather was more colorful and every countryside vista and city-scape was more beautiful.

In that *one* moment on that *one* day in Scotland, *one* choice completely changed the rest of my vacation. And not just for me, but for everyone else! Once I decided to stop trying to be this know-it-all Brit, embrace my inner-nerd and be the tourist I really was, not only did I enjoy every minute of the trip, but it had a ripple effect, making my family's experience that much better as well.

Instance Two – Teen Wolf

You may think this is a little too much information, but I hit puberty early. I started shaving when I was twelve. My voice changed overnight. In the next year, hair multiplied on my arms, legs, underarms... you know, the whole rigmarole. Hair even established prosperous settlements on my chest and abs.

But when my late-teens hit, I began growing hair somewhere that was just unacceptable for a teenager – my back! (And I'm sorry if I just made you throw up in your mouth a little.)

NOOOOOOOOOOOO!

I was so embarrassed. If I knew I was going to a pool party or the beach, I would either try to shave it or wear a T-shirt. Neither option was very fun.

Well, my senior year, I hosted an end-of-the-year pool party at my house for the kids in school. It was great! Swimming, hamburgers and hot dogs, pool and ping pong ... and there I was, in my T-shirt and swim trunks.

Wearing a shirt in the pool is very restrictive. Here I am, watching all my friends actually having a good time, while I was struggling. I was miserable as I allowed my self-consciousness to scare me into believing everyone is going to think I'm gross and not like me as much anymore, especially the pretty girls who were there.

But after a few hours I couldn't take it anymore. Off went my shirt and I jumped in the pool. It was more important to me to have real fun with my friends than live in fear of what they would think about my Teen Wolf impersonation.

And you know what? They didn't care! What was I afraid of? From that moment on, I had the best time. And to top it all off, one of the pretty girls who was there actually tried to kiss me afterward! I'm not talking about a peck on the cheek kind of kiss. I'm talking about an "Ooo-la-la" kind of kiss.

She didn't care that I had a hairy back. She still thought I was attractive. My friends didn't care that I had a hairy back. They still thought I was cool. I think one of my friends did comment on it, "*Dude! You're hairy.*" "*Yeah, I know.*" And that was it.

When I stopped caring about what other's thought, accepted the things about me that I had no control over, I was free! I had fun and enjoyed life. I realized that most people, at least the people who matter, don't really care about how you look as much as you do.

As a Life Coach for teens, my success depends on using these 3 Keys. Each key has been kid tested and mother approved, but each can't be used on its own. Almost like a page from an adventure book, you need all 3 keys to unlock the door, but, honestly, you shouldn't wait 'til they're teenagers.

A solid foundation for a child's self-esteem must be laid in the first 10 years of their life. This will make it a lot easier on you when they hit those terrific teenage years.

Before moving on, I just want to make sure one thing is clear:

These 3 Keys are starting points. They are foundational. They are not the all-in-all antidote for advanced cases of self-destructive teenage behaviors – addiction, verbally and physically abusive to others or self, depression, cutting, and the like.

Are the 3 Keys crucial in these cases? Yes. But other methods must be used to correct such behavior and heal relationships.

(Aside: I don't receive any kickback from any program, book, or website I recommend to you. They are resources I trust, resources from which my wife and I have learned and have applied in our own home, and resources I feel confident in recommending because I have witnessed their effectiveness either in my own life or in that of others.)

My recommendations for parents of deeply troubled teens:

- Counsel with your religious leaders.

- Seek professional counseling for both you and the child – especially in cases of depression, and addiction.

- Get educated

* If you have a rebellious teen on your hands, one of the best FREE educations you can find on effective parenting is watching full episodes of the show World's Strictest Parents, and Brat Camp. (Full episodes are available on YouTube. The shows are not edited for foul language, but the lessons learned are eye-opening.)

- Enroll the child in a “Brat Camp.” Located mostly in the Western United States, Brat Camps are effective in retraining and rehabilitating troubled and rebellious teens... and parents.

- For advanced communication techniques, I recommend The Total Transformation Program by Drs. James and Janet Lehman.

- The book A House United: Teaching Self-Government by parenting advice & family support expert Nicholeen Peck. Nicholeen has many programs that help parents learn, implement, and teach principles of both self and family government. www.ParentingSelfGovernment.com

Most behavioral problems we see in teenagers are a result of low-self-esteem that developed in early childhood. Yep, sorry all you Soccer Moms and Dads, handing out those participation trophies were ineffective substitutes. It's easy to give 'em a trophy; it's much harder to give them our eyes, our ears, our understanding, and our acceptance.

Many of our decisions, both conscious and unconscious, are deeply rooted in our view of self. It reflects in our work, our play, and in our parenting.

**How we see ourselves, is how we see our future.
And we will only rise as high as our self-esteem will allow us.**

So... until my other book comes out, if you struggle with self-esteem issues, one of your first steps in your journey should be logging on to www.GetEsteem.com. It is the website for the Self-Esteem Institute founded by Dr. Marilyn J. Sorensen (who was actually kind enough to endorse my book). There you will find programs to help both adults and youth rebuild one's feelings of self-worth.

CHAPTER 3

DON'T BE A POSER

Self-esteem is self-perception, and how a person sees life depends on how they see themselves.

For example, if a person sees themselves as a victim, they see their circumstances and surroundings differently than would a person who sees themselves as a victor.

Think of the difference between Eeyore and Tigger. When the wind blows down Eeyore's house, he sees it as an obstacle and gets depressed, while Tigger sees it as an opportunity and gets excited. One finds it as proof that even Mother Nature herself is against him, while the other finds it as a chance to build friendships by working together to rebuild.

Perception is also directly proportional to performance. You change a child's perception, you change their performance... you change their life.

If you are able to shift a student's perception from D student to A student, they'll work harder, study harder and perform better.

But how do we do that? How do we change their perception so they can change their life?

Well, we can't change it. But we can help guide them to make the change themselves.

You say, "*But it's been a while since I've been a teenager. It's hard to **relate** to the stuff they're into now.*"

And there's problem number one. Stop trying to *relate* to them!

You start trying to "relate" and you come off like a poser, a doofus, and/or disingenuous, and you lose their respect. Once you've lost their respect, you've lost every possible chance to get through to them.

You want to relate? Be yourself. As long as they sense you are being genuine, and you're consistent, you will have their respect.

When it comes down to it, teens DO want someone who can "relate" but not in the hip-to-pop-culture way you think you have to relate.

In teen-speak, "relate" means "understand."

Teens want an adult who *understands*. And an adult who understands is an adult who *listens*. An adult who listens, is an adult who *cares*. An adult who cares, is an adult who *accepts them unconditionally*.

Giving a teen unconditional acceptance means regardless of what they've done, who they are, what they say, or where they come from, you make them feel understood instead of judged. And that's not always easy. We're human. It's natural to pass judgment.

But one thing you NEVER do is say, “*I understand,*” because you know what they’ll say next. “*No you don’t! How could you possibly understand what I’m going through.*” Then they run away dramatically and slam some door behind them.

Never *say* you understand – *show* them you understand.

Tell them you understand by your actions, not your words.

Let me give you a real life example:

My friend’s wife is a youth leader at her church. For anonymity’s sake, I’ll call her Jane. Jane and her fellow youth leaders would plan outings and activities on a regular basis which gave the girls something positive to do, but also provided the leaders an opportunity to get to know and build relationships with the teenage girls in the group.

This church group teaches the virtue of abstinence until marriage and that sexual misconduct is very serious. One day, a few of the girls confided in Jane that they had been sexually active. They expressed a nonchalant attitude toward the seriousness of their actions and said they were not going to go to their pastor to resolve the issue to help them get back on the right path.

Although Jane did encourage them to go to their pastor, she didn’t treat the girls any differently. She continued to invite them and involve them in their usual programs and activities. Treated them with respect and love, and was there if they needed to talk.

Eventually the girls did go to their pastor who was able to help them. When they returned to Jane to express their deep gratitude, they asked her, “*Do you know why we came to you?*”

“*No.*” Jane replied.

“*Because we never felt judged by you.*”

Don’t confuse acceptance with approval.

Accepting a teenager unconditionally doesn’t mean you have to accept their reasoning, the premise of what they’re saying, their poor behavior or bad attitude, their disrespect, their playing the victim card, or their oft-times poor sense of judgment.

But the simple act of showing them that you accept them for who they are, as a person - their weaknesses, strengths and all - is the first step to helping them build their own self-acceptance. This will lead to their building a more positive self-esteem and self-confidence. It will open the door of a truly meaningful relationship in inspiring and influencing the life of a teen.

Also, don’t take anything personally. Remember, most kids don’t want to be bad. Even bad kids, deep down, wish they were good kids. Bad behavior is normally a coping mechanism. They use that behavior to deal with their own vulnerabilities, negative emotions or feelings, or unsupportive, unaccepting, unloving home environments. And no one has told them otherwise. No one has believed in them. No one has shown them or taught them how to deal with those situations in a healthy manner. So they’ll end up taking the path that requires the least self-control.

We must set the example.

Many at risk kids have grown up witnessing “at risk” adults. In most cases, the children inherit the attitudes of the parents. If you are a “Do as I say, not as I do” parent, your children will grow to be a hypocrite just like you.

Generally speaking, a boy will use violence to express anger if that’s how his father expresses it. A girl will submit to physical abuse if she witnesses her mother submitting to it. If a parent has animosity toward a certain race, the child will have animosity toward that same race. The child will reflect their guardians’ attitudes toward money, relationships, religion, sex, politics, grief, success, etc, until they are convinced otherwise. If a parent is disrespectful, so the child will be. If a parent is blunt, so the child will be.

From the time they’re born, children learn first by observation, second by experimentation and third by instruction when they are old enough to exercise and process logic and reasoning. Even when you don’t think they’re listening, they are. Even when you don’t think they’re watching, they are.

Now, you can be the kindest, most loving parent, but if you fail to correct bad behavior when a child experiments with bad behavior, then, again, the child will always go with the behavior that requires less work and less self-control. You must set boundaries. You must draw lines and set limits.

Any episode of Super Nanny has my back on that point.

CHAPTER 4

99%

Let's face it. We, as adults, especially us parents, do a lot to screw up our kids. Not on purpose, of course... at least not all the time. Many times we say things out of frustration, impatience, or out of our instinct to protect them from disappointment or failure, or to protect the feelings of others out of "fairness," or because of our own self-esteem issues.

Dr. Marilyn J. Sorensen, a clinical psychologist in Portland, Oregon, cautioned, "*Be aware that it will be difficult to raise children with healthy self-esteem if you yourself suffer from low self-esteem. Without realizing it, you will pass on the attitudes, fears, and thinking that accompany low self-esteem.*"

When we're born, we're handed a very pliable piece of glass – figuratively, of course. Imagine it like a crystal clear, mushy ball of Silly Putty. This is the looking glass through which we see ourselves. As we grow our parents, guardians, and teachers help us mold it.

As I have dug through my childhood and youth to discover occurrences that molded my personal view of self, both negative and positive, the most influentially damaging moments were committed by parents and teachers when I was between the ages of 5 and 12.

In elementary school I attended a school for the gifted and talented twice a week for academics. Each year we were required to do a research project and present it to the class. Now this wasn't your average book report presentation. It was a full on 10 – 20 minute presentation, complete with visual aids, handouts, and you couldn't read from your report, you had to have it in outline form on note cards.

What really added the pressure was that your presentation was peer-graded. Each student was given a list of criteria they graded you on and turned it into the teacher for her to tally, and, after averaging all the scores, give you your final grade.

My third grade presentation rocked! My natural gift for public speaking truly came to life at this moment. I felt alive. I connected with my "audience," I effectively used slides, charts, handouts – the whole shebang. I incorporated humor and stories. I knew the subject inside and out and could answer any question they threw at me. I worked hard, studied hard, and practiced hard and it paid off.

Seriously, it was a rush! I felt like I was in my element. No nerves. No stage fright. Was I finding my calling as a natural born presenter?

After it was done, my teacher reviewed my classmate's assessments.

She then called me over and showed me how they graded me.

I scored 100%. That had never happened before! No kid had ever scored 100% on a peer-graded presentation. Ever.

My teacher showed me and told me how amazing that was. I was beaming. I don't think I'd ever felt so grateful yet so proud of being able to accomplish something like that. I knew I killed it, and my work and performance was being reflected back to me in the grade I received.

This was my calling. I was so happy.

My teacher said, looking down through her glasses resting on the tip of her nose, reviewing the grading criteria, "*I really can't find anything wrong with your presentation, but...*" Then she picked up her pen and wrote my final grade on the top of her own paper. The grade that was to go in the grade book.

99%.

Then she said, and her words still ring in my ears today, looking up at me from over her glasses, "... *nobody's that good.*"

There was no maliciousness in her voice. Just a touch of snideness.

- But what do you think that did to my third grade mind?
- How do you think that affected my self-esteem?
- My self-confidence?
- How do you think that molded my "looking-glass?"
- What effect do you think that had on next year's project?
- The effect on my desire to work just as hard?
- The effect on my desire to improve upon my new-found ability?

Honestly, think about all those questions. Take the adult mind out of it and imagine this had happened to you in the third grade.

I will tell you that my fourth grade project on the Loch Ness Monster bombed. Gradually I lost interest in the program and, eventually, I dropped out of the gifted program in 5th grade while I was in the process of putting together my 5th grade project. It just wasn't fun anymore.

Instead of nurturing my gift, she stunted my growth.

My incentive was gone. I no longer had the desire to excel because no matter how hard I worked, the words "*Nobody's that good,*" hung over my head. So no matter what I did, I obviously wasn't going to be good enough. I'd never get 100% so why try? And all the gratitude, excitement and joy I had felt regarding my new found talent must have been a delusion since an adult who I respected told me so.

Now, when I was that age, I didn't understand that this experience was going to be a huge contributing factor to my future scholastic apathy. That this experience would be so ingrained in my subconscious that it would continue to unknowingly sabotage nearly every endeavor I have sought to undertake – even in my adult life.

Only now, as an adult looking back on this experience am I able to see the ramifications of such an experience. What may seem blasé for an adult, can be very traumatic for a child.

Like it or not, we help shape the prism by which our kids see themselves. And we only have about an 18 year window of opportunity before that pliable piece of glass slowly solidifies, becoming harder to shape as each year passes.

So how do we help them shape it?

Let's get into it.

Here's the first key...

CHAPTER 5

THE 1st KEY – OPEN YOUR EARS

By far, the greatest single thing you can do to encourage the development of positive self-esteem in teens is to Listen to them.

Personally, I am very self-conscious in conversation. If you and I were to have a conversation, you would find yourself doing most of the talking. I love listening – probably because I hate talking so much.

All my life, I've been very guarded, and even my closest friends and loved ones accuse me of never opening up.

Why is that?

I've always been self-conscious of my inability to express myself, especially my deepest feelings, or what I'm passionate about.

Why is that?

I'm a stutterer. You wouldn't know it to see me perform, or to see me speak, and it has disappeared significantly since childhood, but the stutter really comes out when I try to express deeply held sentiments or thoughts.

I stuttered so bad as a kid my parents used to call me Porky Pig. Now, believe it or not, that didn't really bother me.

But this did.

Not sure how old I was, a preteen perhaps, but I needed to talk to my parents about something. I remembered sitting in a chair in our living room across from my mom who was in another chair and my dad was on the couch. As I struggled with the words to express what I was feeling, my mom raised her voice in a frustrated and impatient tone and said, "*Will you just spit it out?!*"

As a parent myself, having spoken out of frustration with my own kids, I can totally empathize with my mom. Who knows what she was going through that day? For all I know her and dad were in a fight or she may have been saying it half in jest to help me along, but as a kid... all I heard was:

- "*What you have to say is not worth my time or effort.*"

- "*I have better things to do. I don't care what you think, or how you feel.*"

- "*There is no value in what you have to say. I'm just sitting here out of obligation to you as my child.*"

Did she really mean that? Of course not! But, as a child, you don't have that capacity for reason and the communication is received in a very literal way. There is no context.

If you want your kids to talk to you when they're teens, listen to them when they're children.

It was that moment in my youth that framed my belief, that molded my looking glass, that told me that no one really cares about what I have to say. It made me self-conscious of the way I speak, and that the struggle to say what I feel deeply just isn't worth the effort. No one will care anyway.

How has it affected me now?

It is still difficult for me to share and when I do communicate I tend to over explain to make sure I am understood. That tends to make people zone out which reaffirms my own feelings of inadequacy.

For my mom, this was something insignificant. Just the daily grind of raising kids and a moment easily forgotten. But, it was a life altering experience for me.

Is there a positive side to my experience? Of course!

My daughter caught the stutter gene. But now:

- I can make sure I don't make the same mistake with her that was made with me.
- I've helped family members be more aware.
- We show her love and patience when she gets excited to tell us something.
- We don't playfully stutter back, or bring attention to it.
- Even if it takes her 10 times as long as other kids her age to say the same thing, we make sure we don't act impatient as she's speaking.

Basically, we treat her with dignity.

Treating others, even kids, with dignity shows that you value them as a person. That alone will result in a stronger feeling of self-worth.

Listening is not just hearing. Listening means you focus and try to understand what they are saying.

It means you also show them that you understand or are trying to understand what they are telling you.

You can do this by using technique that I like to call "*good backtalk*." I'm sure there's another name for it in the psychology world, but I like "*good backtalk*," personally.

"Good backtalk" is saying things like, "*Wow, you probably felt pretty _____ when that happened.*"

Or, at an appropriate moment ask, "*Hold on, I don't want to interrupt you, but I just want to make sure I'm understanding what you're saying. Are you saying _____?*" And repeat back to them, in your own words, what they've said.

Even if you're dead on sure you know what they're saying, it's always good to establish the fact that you've actually listened to them by saying, "*So what you're saying is _____?*"

The First Key of Opening Your Ears is a technique that doesn't just work for teens, try this in all of your relationships, both personal and professional, and notice what happens.

CHAPTER 6

THE 2nd KEY – OPEN YOUR EYES

When you open your ears, you must also open your eyes.

You know how it feels when you are talking to someone and they're texting or working on the laptop at the same time? Or how about when they're looking right at you but their eyes zone out? Doesn't make you feel good, does it? So why do it to others, especially young people?

- Close your laptop
- put down your phone
- close your book
- push your paperwork aside...
- ...and look at them.

You have a kid that actually wants to talk! Why would you not drop everything to take full advantage of such an endangered moment?

I know how hard this step can be. My mind runs a mile a minute. I get distracted so easily. If I'm in a conversation and my phone beeps, it takes all the power of the known universe to keep my hands from reaching into my pocket and not spend the rest of the conversation thinking about who just emailed me.

What if it's important? What if my wife really needs something? What if I'm missing an appointment I forgot about? What if someone just answered a question I posted on Facebook...?

Well, what if your preoccupation costs you an opportunity to gain the trust of a child who could really use your help?!

Eye contact is an essential element of effective communication and promotes a person's feeling of self-worth. It lets the person know you're interested in what they are saying.

Each one of us has a person in our circle of friends, family or acquaintances that we always look forward to being around and talking to. I'll bet you anything that that person makes you feel important. Even if it's someone who you don't really socialize with much, but when you see them, they make you feel like you're the only one in the room and they care about your life.

The next time you talk to that person, notice how they look you in the eye and show that they are truly listening by responding to what you have to say. They'll probably throw in a compliment or two as well. Even if you talk to them for only five minutes, you always feel better afterwards.

Opening your eyes also allows you to read another crucial form of communication – body language.

The teacher may ask a student to stay after to go over a test; or a parent asks a child how their day was. In both cases, you notice their verbal communication doesn't match their non-verbal.

They say everything is okay, but their legs are crossed, one hand reaching over to hold their other arm, and their head is down.

As Emmerson said, the eyes truly are the "*window to the soul*". It takes great skill to get the eyes to lie along with the lips. Some kids can do it naturally, most can't.

Use this as an opportunity to connect with and help a teen in need. Don't ignore the signs. Ask them questions to help them open up; and if they don't, don't push it.

The Second Key, Opening Your Eyes, lets them know you not only have a pair of open ears, but they have your attention when they need it most. Continue to show interest in them by asking appropriate questions, giving praise where praise is due. When they are ready to open up and ask for help, they'll know they can trust you.

But you can't seal the deal without the Third Key....

CHAPTER 7

THE 3rd KEY – CLOSE YOUR MOUTH

Back when I was learning how to be married (an ongoing process by the way), my wife would come to me, express her problems at home, and, being the good husband, I'd jump into save the day with all of the possible solutions to her problem.

She would either argue about why each solution wouldn't work or ignore me and change the subject to her problems at work, or with a friend, which I, again, being the good husband, would come to her rescue with the solutions. Eventually, she would just leave the conversation equally as frustrated as she was going into it.

That always left me scratching my head. *"Well, if you don't want my help, why are you bothering to tell me your problems?"*

Then I read something that totally changed things. I read about the difference between trying to fix somebody's problem and just letting them vent to you about their problems. Most people really don't want us to fix their problems, they just want somebody to vent to...they want somebody to listen to them. (Wait a minute... that sounds familiar. Oh yeah, the First Key!)

I tried it. I was doubtful it would work since my solutions are always so impressively brilliant. Right?

But, I was willing to try anything to keep our conversations from ending in the usual way. So I let her talk, and bit my tongue. Then something amazing happened. She cuddled up next to me and gave me a hug. Smiled and seemed to act as if all was right with the world.

How could this be?! I hadn't given her one of my clever fixes, she hadn't implemented any of my ingenious solutions... how could everything be "all better" if I didn't do anything to help?

But that's just it. I did do something to help her. I let her talk. And letting her talk meant keeping my mouth shut.

Even though I still think my ideas are brilliant (don't laugh) many times, a person expressing themselves is not looking for a solution. They're looking for someone to talk to.

Teens are no different. When they do open up, they just want someone to hear them.

Unless specifically asked for, don't start jumping in and start trying to fix them. Don't try showing them the error of their thinking, or that they should reconsider their circle of friends, or they should try this or try that – no matter how right you are.

Once a teen begins to open up to you, the fastest way to shut that door back up is to immediately jump in and try to "fix" them. Many times they already know the answers, but they just need to vent.

In these situations, the only words out of your mouth should be "good backtalk."

I remember one time, in a moment of teen angst, I vented to my dad. I was really upset, not with him, but with the world and with my life. I don't know what caused it but I just remember the eruption of sentiments of how I've never felt understood or accepted by anyone. I even cussed in front of him and I never did that.

And he just listened. When I finished, I stood staring out of the window. He didn't interrupt me. He didn't tell me what he thought I should do. He just came up behind me, put a hand on my shoulder and, in a calm, steady, caring tone, said something to the effect of, "*I don't really understand what you're going through, but...*"

I wish I could remember what he said after that. I really do. But all I do remember is how I felt. There was a reassurance that I had someone who cared for me. There was someone who, even though they couldn't understand what I was going through in a literal sense, could accept that I was going through it and validated my feelings. His simple words and confident tone gave me reassurance that everything would be okay and I would get through it.

"Children don't care what you do for them. They care how you make them feel." –Anon.

Making them *feel* you are there to listen to them, that you *value* what they have to say, that you still treat them with *dignity* and respect no matter what they have done, and that you are not there to "*fix*" them will generate feelings of acceptance. They will begin to trust you because they feel accepted by you, making them more willing to listen when the time is right to drop a little wisdom on them or guide them through solving their own problems.

This is the power behind the Third Key – Close Your Mouth

CHAPTER 8

WRAP UP

So, do you have a child in mind? A teenager who needs your eyes and ears? A student who is looking for someone to talk to and not be talked at?

Remember, the Three Keys of Effective Communication with teens are:

1. Open your ears
2. Open your eyes
3. Close your mouth

I'm going to share one last personal example of an adult in my life who used the Three Keys to help me through a tough time when I was a boy. As we walk through the example, notice how they effectively use the Three Keys.

In 5th grade, if there was time after class, we could bring in records to play on the record player before the bell rang. I remember coming home from school one day, going to my room and just breaking down in tears.

My mom came in and sat next to me asking what was wrong. *"I don't have any friends!"* Through gasping sobs, wiping tears from my cheeks and snot from my upper lip with my sleeve, I explained that no one wanted to listen to the song I wanted to listen to. I wanted to listen to the Beastie Boys Fight For Your Right To Party and they didn't. I was out voted.

To an adult, that sounds silly, but for a eleven year old, I can still remember the heartbreaking feeling of isolation that cut me to the heart when that happened.

I felt completely friendless even though I had a lot of peers who would call me their friend. But what had happened was that group rejection was magnified by a belief system that was beginning to take root in me.

A belief system that began when I started hiding parts of who I was because I was made fun of or bullied for it.

I thought pink shoes would be cool, and was unanimously rejected. I was active in the performing arts, and was made fun of by a lot of kids who didn't understand what it was all about.

For an eleven year old boy, this rejection broke me. I was so tired of feeling rejected. Feeling like no one liked what I liked. Faking to like things that I cared nothing about, or wasn't good at, just to fit in, which, at times, would make me look even more like a fool.

My mom didn't judge me. She stopped what she was doing, used her ears and her eyes to show me she was listening.

She didn't laugh or interrupt to tell me how silly I was acting. She kept her mouth closed. And when it was obvious that I was done, when she did open her mouth, she validated what I was feeling. She didn't say much after that. She knew I just needed to let out the emotion of what had just happened.

Remember –

“Children don't care what you do for them. They care how you make them feel.”

At that time, my mom knew how to make me feel. She was the friend I needed at that time.

The looking glass you help your child or your student create must be built with love, acceptance, and respect. In short, treat them with dignity.

- If they feel that you believe in them, they are more likely to believe in themselves.
- If they feel that you trust them, they are more likely to trust themselves.
- If they see you really listening to what they have to say, then they are more likely to believe their thoughts and feelings have value.
- If they see you taking an interest in their life, then they are more likely to believe their life is interesting... and worth living.

Helping a child develop a sense of their own value, will lead them to make decisions that reflect their own feelings of competence and self-worth.

A person will never rise higher than who they believe themselves to be.

Your next steps:

1. Think of someone, your student or your own child, who would benefit from a better relationship with you.
2. Begin applying the Three Keys in your conversations.

This is achievable even with the most difficult teenager. But with a desire in your heart and the will in your mind, you can do this..

...I believe in you.

Need a coach in the challenging game of your life? Need someone to push you to become the person you were born to be?

Sign up for a free consultation with Justin at <http://www.NationalSchoolSpeaker.com/coaching>.

BONUS CHAPTER

I couldn't stop with just 3 Keys, so here are three more tips and tricks to help your children or students, and improve your relationship with them.

1: *Don't Give Them the Answer*

A great way to build self-esteem in teens is to allow them to solve their own problems.

Self-esteem is not built by someone else. A person must build their own. Now an outsider can help frame a person's self-perception, other people can support one's self-esteem, but what self-esteem isn't is a bunch of people blowing smoke up each other's rear ends.

Self-esteem is not the "touchy-feely" grade school curriculum that it's made out to be.

Building self-esteem is hard work that requires action, not fluffy compliments; it requires goal setting and goal achieving; not rewarding common effort and standard expectations.

One of the best ways to build self-esteem is to solve and overcome personal challenges.

Giving someone the answer is NOT helping them.

That will not provide them with any sense of responsibility over their own life or provide them with any sense of accomplishment, or increase their feelings of competency as they face their challenge.

My son, when he was young, was not the best at math. It required a part of the brain that wasn't used to exercise.

For a while, he would use every technique in the book to get me or his mom to give in and give him the answer; basically do his problem for him (like his grandparents do). He'd blame the teacher, call himself stupid, play the victim-card, scream and cry for literally 20 minutes or more, until he realized we weren't going to give in.

The best way to help a teen, or anyone for that matter, solve a problem, is to ask questions.

True help requires guiding them through their problem. Since they learn absolutely nothing if you just give them the answer.

Like the old adage, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

So when my son was ready, we would ask him questions about the next step he should take in the problem. If he got stuck, instead of telling him what it was, we'd refer back to a previous

problem and ask him what he did there. Always reminding him that he really did know how to do this and expressing our belief that he could do it. By doing this, we were training his mind to think through the problem on his own, so he would know how to do it the next time. Once he completed a problem with one of us in the room, we gave him praise and told him to do the next one on his own and then we'd leave the room.

This allowed him to prove to himself that he could do it on his own, boosting his feeling of competence and subsequently boosting his self-esteem.

Self-esteem is built by doing.

Many times, after I speak at a school, or conference, or workshop, young people come up to me to tell me how much my message resonated with them, how many answers it gave them to the issues they've been dealing with, but often times I have one or two that are emotional and want to open up about some of the problems they've been facing.

One girl in particular comes to mind. And she came to mind because I failed miserably in putting into practice the very thing I have been telling you to do. This is when I learned my lesson.

A sweet young lady came up to me after the throngs of other students had already gone on to lunch. My wife was putting the camera away after recording the event and this girl began welling up.

She was struggling with self-identity. She was struggling with how one of her biggest dreams to be a singer clashed with her biggest fear of being in front of people.

As she was trying to talk with me, my mind was preoccupied with making sure we didn't let one of the event planners get away, and other items we didn't want to forget as my wife packed up.

I remember interrupting this girl to hurriedly ask my wife to find a particular person, and my wife kept giving me this look and then looking back at the girl.

Later, my brilliant and very observant wife told me, *"This girl was in need, about to cry and you were more concerned with other things instead of focusing on her."*

Eventually I sat down with this girl in what little time I had. I opened my ears and my eyes, but didn't shut my mouth completely.

I could see her struggling and I wasn't helping... because I didn't shut my mouth, or ask the right questions.

I gave her a few things to think about and shared my own similar struggles and how I dealt with them until her mom and sister came in. I gave her a hug, but I knew I had failed to help her in the way she needed. We both left feeling unfulfilled.

What I should have done was sit down with her immediately, let her unload and give her the “good backtalk” to make her feel that I knew exactly what she was saying. I already had her trust as a result of the presentation. And she was, basically asking for my help and guidance.

My job then was to use that trust to ask her a few questions to get her thinking and express my confidence in her ability to work through her problem.

First thing you must do is validate their feelings. Then find out if they want you to help them through it. You can say something like, “*Hmmm, you’re in a tough spot right now. I can see why you’re feeling _____. So, would you like me to help you with this?*”

Now, you may not even need to ask. If your ears and eyes have been open while they’ve been talking, you may know by their facial expression and body language that they are asking for help.

Once you know they actually want your help and advice, the first thing you ask them should be some form of the following question:

“Well what do you think you should do?”

For the most part, always speak in terms of “What do you *think*...” (for boys) and “What do you *feel*...” (for girls). As you guide them, continue to ask the questions you would ask yourself if facing the same problem.

And never underestimate the power of silence. Don’t feel like you have to fill the air with words.

One thing I learned in my acting training was, “sometimes more is said when nothing’s spoken.”

Ask a question and then zip it. Let them think. Let them talk. If they don’t give a complete answer, just keep looking at them. Eventually, they’ll start talking it through.

Depending on the problem, don’t expect to come up with a solution right then and there. But there should be some action items, or “homework,” for them to work on before moving to the next step.

If you’ve ever been to counseling, this should all sound familiar.

Disclaimer: Don’t take on issues that are over your pay grade. For example, if you are a teacher and are approached by a student who is dealing with abuse at home, refer them to their school counselor. Don’t abandon them, though. Don’t let them feel you’re passing them off. Let them talk, show interest in their life, and that you care about them, but let them know that this is something a professional counselor should be dealing with.

2: Do Give Them Your Faith

The most damaging thing that hit my self-esteem as a kid that has severely handicapped me as an adult was an experience I had with my dad.

I fell in love with one of my mom's old Spike Jones' records. Spike Jones led a musical variety show back in the 1940s and 50s. Think of Saturday Night Live put to Little Rascals music. That record played constantly in my room, and I knew every word and acted out every routine. I just knew it would have been hilarious and fun entertainment if it were still around today.

One day I shared with my dad an idea. It was an idea I had carefully planned out and visualized. I wanted to get a bunch of my friends together and put on a "Spike Jones" show at church. We would all lip sync and act out the scenes with the record.

When I heard my dad going down the stairs, I popped out of my room to tell him my idea, to which he replied, without even looking back, "*Well that would be boring, wouldn't it?*"

With that, I shrunk in my room feeling pretty dejected.

What operating code did that statement program into the super-computer of my subconscious?

"My creative ideas are boring and no one will really like them."

What could he have said instead?

"Okay, let's give it a try." Even if he knew it would be boring, let me go through the process of trying to recruit my friends, run rehearsals, do the marketing, and put on the show.

If it was a flop, then he could sit down with me and ask, "What do you think went wrong, and what can you do better next time?"

In trying to protect me – and my potential audience – from a let-down, he killed any opportunity to teach me to go after my dream; to teach me how to be responsible; to teach me leadership; to teach me to try even though I might fail; to give me the opportunity to build my self-esteem; to give me the chance to accomplish something I had never done before.

Instead, he unintentionally taught me to doubt in my own ability and ideas.

One of things that will help your child trust themselves, their ideas, and their abilities is for people like you to trust them.

If they feel that those they respect do not trust them, they will not have enough self-respect to try to achieve things for themselves. If you do not show confidence in what they can do, how do you expect them to develop their talents and achieve their potential?

3: Do Give Them Their Voice.

It's so easy, especially as a parent, to fly off the handle and impose punishments and restrictions that are a little over the top.

Let's say an 11 year old boy uses his mother's Yoga mat to do his exercises one morning. He then goes outside for a minute, then returns tracking grass and dirt over the mat that he failed to put away.

When the mother sees it, she is justifiably upset, even though this particular incident was a first offence.

What should she do?

Should she raise her voice and say, "Why can't you ever put things away?!"

"But mom, I just..."

"No! That's it. You're not using my mat anymore!"

Or

Should she look at him, and with calm firmness in her voice, say "Son, look at my yoga mat. What do you see?"

"But mom, I just had to run outside real quick to get something I forgot."

"I understand that you had to go get something. And that's okay. But you walked over the mat with your dirty shoes, so now you need to clean it. Do you think this will help you remember to put it away next time?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Then give him a hug and a kiss.

The right to argue and to explain your side of the story has become only a privilege in most homes. This should not be.

Parents also make mistakes. And kids, even when you think they aren't paying attention, see those mistakes.

Before judging and imposing sanctions, it is important that you allow your kids to state their case and explain their actions. Then you can judge accordingly.

Allowing them their own voice and their own opinion is one way to teach them to think on their own and decide for themselves. Thus, they begin to trust their instincts and develop their self-esteem.

Now, you may think I'm being pretty hard on you parents out there. Well, raising emotionally healthy kids is a huge responsibility.

Yes, you will do and say things that will negatively affect your children. Yes, they will have to deal with those negative effects throughout their life. But don't let that discourage you. As long as you are progressing in creating and maintaining a positive, safe, and reinforcing home life with appropriate discipline and consistency, showing love, giving affection, apologizing when you have acted inappropriately, those positives will build trust, and give those children the strength they will need to overwrite any negative programming.

Remember, help them solve their own problems, give them your faith, and give them their voice. That's just three more ways to help a child in their personal development, and improve your relationship with them.

Know some kids that need a little help? How about some adults?

Whether you need him to speak at your next event, or if it's one-on-one coaching let Justin know by logging on to www.NationalSchoolSpeaker.com

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