

Spotlighting Teen Issues

for
Parents

Communicating With Your Teen

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Sometimes the gulf between adults and teens seems huge and communication seems impossible. Yet good communication with your teenage children is key to helping them make good decisions and lead healthy lives. Luckily there are ways to make communication with teens more effective. Here are some guidelines that can help parents and other adults communicate successfully with the teens they care about.

General Tips

- Be patient. Teens may need time to build enough trust to really talk.
- Ask questions that can't be answered with just a "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions will draw out more information.
- Listen more than you talk.
- Respect privacy and confidentiality. Don't share information given unless you've specifically stated you will do so and why.
- Withhold judgment on matters that involve values and the teen's means of expressing them unless it's an issue of real risk to the teen.
- Use terms the adolescent will understand.
- Listen for understanding, not "Truth." Sometimes the information a teen shares appears incorrect, but it's important to understand what this means to them.
- Be honest, but compassionate.
- Express empathy, even when it's difficult.
- Give the adolescent control over something. This can be as simple as "Would you like your dental appointment to be on Tuesday or Thursday?" Be specific about the choices.

Especially for Young Teens

- Use concrete language, expect concrete questions and provide concrete answers.
- Help teens identify their feelings.
- Be aware of their allegiances to friends.
- Remember that teens often feel a conflict between their desire to be independent and their need to depend on their parents.

For Older Teens

- Treat the teenager more like an adult.
- Assess their ability to think abstractly.
- Remember their behavior can be very changeable—mature, responsible and upbeat one day but immature, childish and irresponsible the next, especially when they are under stress.



- Let the adolescent take primary responsibility for his/her needs.

Communication Techniques You Can Use

Verbal Communication

- Be aware of your voice. The way you say something is often more important than what you say.
- Use phrases like “Please tell me more” to encourage communication.
- Ask clarifying questions, such as “What sort of things?”
- Acknowledge and reflect feelings. “You really hate that.” encourages more response.
- Interpreting what a teen says can offer a new way to view the experience — “Are you perhaps feeling that the teacher doesn’t respect your time and interests?”
- A teen may listen more readily to a suggestion (a mild form of advice) than to a stronger statement. “Perhaps you could....”

Non-Verbal Communication

Your facial expressions and body language can support, emphasize or contradict what you say.

- **Facial expressions**
Smiles, frowns and other facial expressions are generally believed more than the words you say, so be aware of whether your expression seems to contradict your words.
- **Eye contact**
It acknowledges the other person and lets him see your expressions.
- **Body posture**
Directly facing a teen in an open position shows that you have a positive attitude toward her.
- **Touch**
Use it carefully — it can be either comforting or intrusive, depending on the situation.
- **Silence**
Remember that no response is also a response, but your meaning may be unclear.
- **Cultural differences**
The meanings of body language can vary from one culture to another. For example: Hispanics are often

comfortable with less personal space than European-Americans. Some Native Americans may not make eye contact because they believe doing can be disrespectful.

Things to Avoid

- Unsolicited advice will make your teens think you don’t value their judgment.
- “You should” statements are often rejected as showing a lack of understanding of the other person’s position.
- Ridicule and insulting and shaming statements will cause the teen to “shut down” and stop further communication.

Resources

Elkind, D. 1994. *Parenting Your Teenager*. New York: Ballantine Books.

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