

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Communicating With Your Teen: Spending Time Together



Teens often spend less time with parents than they spend with other teens. Parents should not assume that their teens no longer need or want to spend time with them. Because teens can do more on their own, say they don't want parents around as much, and have other places to be than home with the family, parents often back off and sometimes give their teens too much space.

Some privacy and opportunities to be away from you are good for your teen. They can, however, have too much privacy and too little time with parents. Your teen still needs you to spend time with and do activities with. But time together is different once children become teens, and this time is different for different teens.

Dealing With Unpleasant Feelings When Your Teen Wants to Spend Less Time With You

Geraldine's feelings were hurt when her daughter Angela stopped telling Geraldine all her secrets. "Now she tells her girlfriends the things she used to tell me," Geraldine says with a sadness in her voice. It is hard for Geraldine to feel shut out from parts of her child's life that used to be shared with her. But instead of feeling sad about the changes, Geraldine can think of Angela's friendships with other teens as evidence that she has done a good job in raising her daughter. Research shows that when children have close, connected relationships with parents, they are better able to form healthy relationships with other teens and adults.

Just because Angela does not tell Geraldine all her secrets, Geraldine can still maintain a close relationship with Angela, but it will be different than it

was when Angela was younger. One way to stay connected with Angela is to find activities to share. Both Geraldine and Angela enjoy being outside. Possibly, they can find common interests in gardening, hiking nature trails together, painting the shutters around the house, or simply walking the family dog together in the evening.

Parent-Teen Activities: You and Your Teen Can Find Many Ways To Spend Time Together

It is important to make the most of the moments you do have together rather than trying to plan the perfect moments that may never happen. Be realistic about your schedule and your teen's schedule. Both of you have things you need or want to do away from home, such as work, school, time with friends, and activities with other special groups to which you each belong. You also have time commitments to other family members. Finding

time for each other when you both feel like it can be a challenge. Find activities that easily fit into each of your schedules. These might include preparing a meal together occasionally, going for a walk, sending each other e-mails, or working on household tasks that you both enjoy.

Occasionally, do something that takes a little more planning: hike a favorite park, take an art class together, read the same book and take time to talk about it, do a volunteer activity together, or plan a “just us day” that involves doing activities in town that you both enjoy. If you have an older teen that is considering college or a job after high school, plan to take trips together to visit possible colleges or places of employment.

Make the Most of the Time You Spend Together

- Keep most of your one-on-one time together light.
- Don't grill your teen about behavior and friends each time you are together.
- Use your time together to enjoy each other. Find shared interests, find ways to feel comfortable so when it does get heavy, you will really be able to talk.

Increase Your Teen's Interest in Spending Time With You

Listen to your teen's ideas of what would be fun or interesting—and do them.

Mark has been trying to get his parents to go on a week-long camping trip with him, but there never seems to be time. One Saturday morning when the weather is nice and Mark says to his parents, “Let's go camping at the park that is only 30

minutes away. We can get the car loaded in an hour or two and we'll still have plenty of light to set up our tents. This time of year it shouldn't be too crowded. We can spend the afternoon and evening there and then come home on Sunday morning.” Mark's parents realize that they really didn't have any special plans for Saturday, and the park nearby would be a nice get-away. They agree to go, the family has a great time enjoying the outdoors, cooking over a fire, and telling funny stories. Mark is pleased that his parents finally decided to do something he wanted to do. Mark's parents realize that spending time together as a family is something that really helps them feel close, and they agree with Mark that he had a very good idea.

When your teen initiates time with you, try to stop what you are doing and spend at least a brief period doing something together.

Kate is looking out the window watching a blue bird at the bird feeder. She calls to her mother to come watch the bird. Kate's mom calls back that she is in the middle of washing the dishes. Kate goes into the kitchen and tells her mom that she has to come see this spectacular bird. Kate's mom sees the excitement in Kate's face, puts down her dishtowel, and joins Kate at the window to watch the blue-bird. Mom and daughter end up spending a half-hour enjoying the bird, talking together about their day, and simply enjoying each other's company. Kate's mom is glad she took the time to be with her daughter.

Take an interest in what your teen likes and become more informed on these topics. You will have more to talk about with each other.

Millie loves to dance to her favorite tunes on MTV. She walks around the house singing the songs she likes, often not hearing her father when he asks her something. He can't understand why she is always singing those silly songs. One day he watches MTV for himself. Millie joins him. The two talk about the songs Millie likes and her father starts to understand more about why the music is important to her. Millie asks her father what kind of music he likes; he shares it with her. Lately, father and daughter have been spending more time together sharing something they both enjoy—music.

When doing a shared activity, sometimes let your teen take the lead, showing you how to do something or telling you his or her point of view.

Alvin loves to create deserts. His mother Lilly also is quite a chef. One afternoon, Lilly is preparing a birthday cake for Alvin's sister. Alvin comes in and asks if she would like some help. Lilly says of course, and Alvin shows her some new ways to decorate the cake. Lilly is impressed with Alvin's talent, and Alvin enjoys showing his mother something new.

Following are a few activity ideas to get you started. It's important to select activities that both you and your teen find enjoyable. You are more likely to do the activity if it fits in with your lifestyle and you both feel you have positive experiences when you do it.

What you might do

Cooking

How you might do it

Try doing a creative meal together once a month. Both of you do the planning and agree that each of your ideas will be included. Talk about the kinds of foods you want to try. Consider new recipes and adventures in cooking. In planning the meal, each of you will have a contribution to make in food selection, food preparation, and food presentation. Divide the responsibilities equally and let your teen make as many decisions as you do. Have family and friends join you to enjoy the meal (and help clean up).

Why it's a good thing

You get to be creative and adventurous. Your teen spends some time being in charge and responsible. Eating good food feels good, and you get to share these good feelings.

Using a Computer

Consider creating a directory that contains files only you and your teen share. These can include accounts of special memories, dreams, challenges that have been mastered over the years, promises, and letters to each other. If you live apart from your teen, you can create this through e-mail.

You both get to share your views and get to know each other better. It can open conversations about your family and ways to feel close and connected with each other.

Gardening

Creating a garden can be done gradually. It is always growing. Decide together about the shape of the garden, what to plant and where, and how to decorate it. You also can have a specific area in your garden that your teen gets to design and manage any way he or she likes.

Gardening is an ongoing venture that allows for creativity, shared hard work, and shared rewards of your efforts.

Enjoying Sports

If you and your teen are active in sports, try sharing a sport on a regular basis. Use it as a time to unwind together and challenge each other but be a good sport whether you win or lose. Consider playing tennis, soccer, basketball, or badminton. You also might enjoy swimming, fishing, running, or cycling.

Even though the intensity may change over time, you can enjoy sports for many years to come. Experiencing good sportsmanship is a valuable life lesson for your teen.

Reading

Many teens like to read interesting books and think about what they read. It might be fun to think together about a book you both read. If you enjoy doing this, you may want to expand your shared reading to include a few friends of your teens and some of their parents. Take turns thinking of interesting questions to discuss and activities you can do related to the books you read.

Many ideas can be shared when you read together. Discuss issues characters face that may offer insights about your own lives.

Learning about Fitness

Not dieting or losing weight but getting healthy is what this is about. If this is something you and your teen want to do, share it. But be smart and learn together about what it means to eat healthy. You and your teen can design a fitness plan that includes healthy meals and exercise activity that both of you can enjoy together. Explore exercise options together.

Health is important. Sharing this important aspect of your lives is a way to offer each other support and nurturance. You will also help your teen to develop a good attitude about physical fitness and self-care.

Exploring
Photography

Creating photo albums and picture collages of some of your favorite snapshots can be a great thing to share. Together you and your teen can design these collections to reflect your favorite people, special events in your lives, and exciting places you have lived and traveled. You can take turns creating the layouts and deciding on the captions to go with your pictures.

Whether you think of photography as an art form or a way to capture precious memories and people in your lives, sharing this activity leads to many opportunities for enjoyable moments with your teen. Pictures help families keep their history alive and remember special times.

For more ideas for activities, see <http://www.aces.edu/teens/parenteen/index.htm>.



Jennifer Kerpelman, *Extension Specialist*, Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability. 5M, **Reprinted Nov 2004**, HE-782
© 2004 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.