

Principles of Parenting

Communicating With Your Teen

► Learn tips for talking with your teen to avoid conflict and bring resolution.

You probably have a teenager in your house if there is talk about dating, driving, telephone use, curfew, drugs, sex, music, and friends. These are common teenage topics that are a lot easier to manage when parents and teens communicate effectively with each other.

Effective communication occurs when the person sending a message makes it clear and easy to understand and the person on the receiving end understands the message as the sender intended. In the real world, especially in families, this is not always easy to do.

Parents often are busy with work demands, running the household, and taking care of responsibilities to family and friends. Teens are involved in the academic and social demands of school, after-school and weekend activities, and spending time with friends.

With so much going on, it is no surprise that many of us do not take the steps needed to communicate clearly and to listen carefully. This can lead to problems when talking to teens. Parents and teens can do two things to reduce communication problems:

Talk more often. The more you talk with each other, the more you have the chance to share important messages. Good times to talk with teens are before leaving for the office and school, during dinner, and on weekends. Try to plan at least one meal a day at a time when the family sits together and talks. Sometimes it does not matter what you talk about, just that you are talking to each other regularly.

Take extra time to share important messages. When you need to tell your teens something important, such as the responsibilities of caring for a younger sister or brother, take the time to sit down and talk face to face. You also can write down the important details and ask them to verbalize their understanding of the message. Teens can use this same approach when they need to share important messages with you.



Why Communication Is So Important During the Teenage Years

As teens get older, they will spend more time away from parents and family. They will need to make decisions on their own and will be expected by others to take responsibility for their actions.

Although teens are gaining more independence from their parents, they are not experienced and need continuing parental guidance. Being sensitive to your teens' levels of maturity when offering guidance helps in building greater self-confidence in them.

When you communicate sensitively with your teens, you are helping them in a number of ways to grow up to be responsible adults.

You are helping your teens to understand that family rules change as they get older.

When Jack turned 16 and received his driver's license, he wanted to use the family car for weekend activities.

He and his mom discuss rules for using the car and how car privileges will depend upon Jack's showing responsibility. He is expected to fill the car with gas before bringing it home, and he needs to have it home at the time promised.

Setting up these rules in advance helps Jack to know what is expected of him when he uses the car. Knowing the rules also helps him to accept the consequences if he falls short of obeying the rules.

You are helping your teens figure out the kind of people they are becoming as they prepare for adult responsibilities.

Mary and her parents watch a television show about teens and sex. After the show they discuss their views about teen sexuality and responsibility. Mary needs to know her parents' views about teen sexual behavior and to feel comfortable expressing her own views.

Should Mary be faced with a difficult decision about her own sexual behavior, she will be more likely to make a good decision. She also will be more likely to talk with her parents if there is an open line of communication.

You are helping your teens to have better self-esteem.

Tim compares himself often to other kids at school. He frequently feels like a failure, since he does not do as well on tests as others and is second string on the basketball team.

Tim's dad has listened to his son complain about not being as good as other kids and has expressed understanding of his feelings. This usually helps Tim to feel better.

Dad has been taking more time with Tim to do activities they both enjoy. He makes a special effort to make comments about things that Tim does well. He also is helping Tim to appreciate his own strengths and abilities.

You are offering your teen good role modeling in solving problems with other people.

Erin and her mom are out shopping one day when a salesperson is rude to them as they try to return some clothes. Mom calmly tells the salesperson that she expected to be permitted to return the items and asks if a manager is present who can assist with the return. The salesperson responds in a more helpful fashion.

Erin later asks Mom why she did not get angry at the salesperson. Mom replies, "I was angry, but I have learned that I get better results when I stay calm and think about the best way to get the response I want." Through the experience, Erin had the opportunity to observe and discuss a good way to handle problems with other people.

You are helping your teen to make important life decisions.

Henry is trying to decide on a college. He wants to pick the best one, but he is not sure how to do this. His parents talk with him about his future goals, about the colleges that have programs that interest him, and about colleges that the family can afford. They suggest that Henry call some of the colleges and arrange to visit the ones that are on the top of his list. They talk with Henry about other steps he can take to narrow his choices.

Henry's parents help him to figure out how to make good decisions. Plus, they permit him to take the steps needed to make a good choice.

Elements of Good Parent-Teen Communication

Listening

The most important thing parents can do to improve communication with teens is to listen to them. Teens need to feel that they matter and can depend on their parents to support and protect them.

Listening conveys messages of caring and safety and helps you to have more influence in your teens' lives. By listening, you can better stay in touch with their experiences and feelings even though they are spending a lot of time away from you.

Ultimately, listening begets listening. When you listen to teens, teens are more likely to listen to you. The next time you sit down together, ask your teens to tell you about something and quietly listen to what they have to say.

Tackling Tough Topics

Don't be afraid to talk about the tough topics. Involvement in problem behaviors such as sex and drug use can be part of experimentation during the teen years. Even nice kids experiment. Often the first reaction is to shy away from these topics or to give responses that send the message, *This is something that we don't talk about.*

The problem with avoiding tough topics is that parents risk not knowing when their teens may be getting into trouble. Parents may not realize that experimenting has gone too far, and their teens are in over their heads.

Take teens and sex, for example. Teens are going to have questions about sex, and they are going to have sexual feelings and thoughts.

When teens have questions about their thoughts or feelings, parents who give them support and understanding are more likely to have teens who do not act impulsively when faced with a decision about sex. These teens are more informed about what they are feeling and thinking and about the consequences of acting on their thoughts and feelings.

When teens understand what may happen if they engage in sexual activity and that their parents are not afraid to talk with them and to help them find answers about sex, these teens are better protected from the pressures of others to engage in sexual behavior.



You can do several things to make dealing with tough topics easier:

- Check in with your teen regularly, know where your teen is, and check out concerns you have about your teen's behavior. This will make it more likely that you will learn about trouble in the early stages and have a better chance of helping your teen before things get out of hand.
- Encourage your teen to invite friends to your house for the afternoon or for dinner. You can learn a lot about your teen's life by making your home a comfortable place for friends.
- Talk with others who parent their own teens in a way you respect.

Disagreements That Won't Go Away

Sometimes it's the day-to-day disagreements between parents and teens that can leave parents feeling powerless and wishing they knew what to do. Parents and teens often find themselves bickering about household responsibilities, curfews, friends, and activities. A lot of this bickering occurs because teens

and parents view these day-to-day problems in very different ways.

Take for example the responsibility of caring for a bedroom. For many teens, the neatness of their rooms is not a main concern. Friends and activities outside the home are often their central priorities. For many parents, teens' lack of care for their bedrooms makes them feel like the teens don't respect their values.

The good news is that many sloppy teens respect their parents and grow up to be responsible adults. But until they become responsible for their own homes, they may not feel that housecleaning is very important. What is a frustrated parent to do in the meantime?

Many parents find themselves constantly pleading with their teens to clean their rooms. Often the parents end up cleaning the rooms themselves or just accepting the mess. Is there a way to talk with teens that will make a difference?

George's mom is feeling frustrated because his room is always a mess. The two have been battling over this issue for several months. George's view is that his room is his private space that he can maintain as he pleases. If he does not mind the mess, why should his mom?

When Mom yells at George for his lack of responsibility and grounds him for the weekend, she has done nothing to successfully solve the problem. Both become more convinced that this problem is a "battle of the wills" rather than something that can be solved together.

Mom and George will make more progress if they are willing to extend some give and take about George's room, since teens need space that is their own. They could discuss the main things that need to be cleaned or organized, such as removing leftover food or putting dirty clothes in a hamper or basket. They can discuss the types of rewards that will be gained or lost depending on how he keeps his part of the bargain.

Reaching an agreement that both of them like may take a little time. Putting their agreement in writing is a good way to increase the likelihood of George's cooperation. Mom also must follow through by giving or taking away privileges according to the agreement. For George to hold up his end of the agreement, Mom must hold up hers.



When Talking Is Going Nowhere

Talking is not always easy between parents and teens. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try to communicate, either nothing seems to get through or your teens hear the wrong message. When this happens, it is necessary to reconsider *how* you are communicating. A publication in this series that offers helpful information about how to communicate effectively in families is “Communication: Building a Strong Bridge Between You and Your Children” (Extension publication HE-0686).



Communication Closers and Openers

Approaches that close the door to good communication with teens include the following:



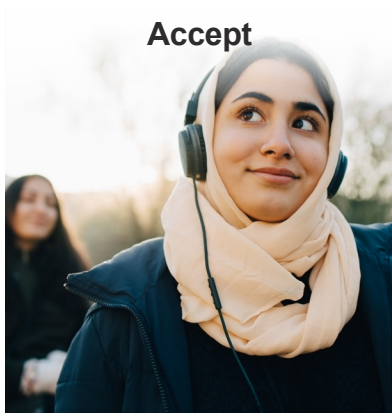
- Talking down to your teen
- Being judgmental and critical of your teen
- Refusing to listen to your teen's point of view

You can open the door to good communication with teens the following ways:

- Make it clear that you are ready and willing to listen. “I really care about what you think.” “Your ideas are important to me.” “Tell me how you see it.”
- Let your teen know that you are working to understand his or her perspective. “What I am understanding you to say is...” “So what is really important to you is...” After saying what you heard your teen say, ask if you got it right.
- Express your willingness to work together with your teen to arrive at a decision. “Let’s each of us offer some ideas on how to deal with this.” “How would you do it?” “What do you think should happen?”
- Take time to connect with your teen every day—a meal together, a few minutes together each evening before going to bed, longer periods of time together on the weekend, etc.
- Find activities that you enjoy doing together. Sometimes teens find it difficult to share what is on their minds during face-to-face conversation. Doing an activity together, such as playing games on the computer, preparing a meal, working on a hobby, or traveling around town, can make conversation flow more easily. Teens will say more when they feel relaxed.
- Permit your teen some privacy. Teens need time to themselves and the right not to share everything with their parents. They will be more willing to share the important things with you if they feel respected by you. Permitting independence from you is a great way to show a teen respect.
- Allow your teen to have opinions that differ from yours. The freedom for teens to have their own ideas and views helps them to become emotionally mature as they move toward adulthood and need to think on their own.



Communicating With Class Makes Talking Easier

	What to Do	Why It Matters
Be Clear and Calm 	<p>If your teens break rules, be calm in dealing with them. It's okay to take a break and relax before you talk with them. Once you feel calm, sit down with them and let them know why you are disappointed in their actions, what the consequences are for the actions, and what actions you want them to take in the future.</p>	<p>Teens need for you to have rules for their behavior. They need to understand the rules, and the rules should be appropriate for their ages. When you remain calm, you help your teens to be calm, and you get your message across the way you intend.</p>
Listen 	<p>Find a quiet place away from a noisy television and other people in order to hear what your teens are saying and to make sure you understand their point of view. Give them your full attention by looking at them while they talk and nodding your head. Share what you heard them say and ask if you got it right.</p>	<p>Teens want to feel that they matter. Listening to them is a powerful way to let them know that they are important to you. Teens will seek out people who listen to them. You want to be one of those people.</p>
Accept 	<p>Tell your teens often that you love them. Let them know every week what you think is special and wonderful about them. When your teens disappoint you, tell them that you are disappointed in the behavior not in them.</p>	<p>Your teens are unique people, separate from you. They need to feel that you accept who they are, even when they do things you do not like. Teens learn best from their mistakes if they have caring people in their lives who think they are special, no matter what. Feeling special and understood is what helps a teen have better self-worth.</p>

What to Do

Why It Matters

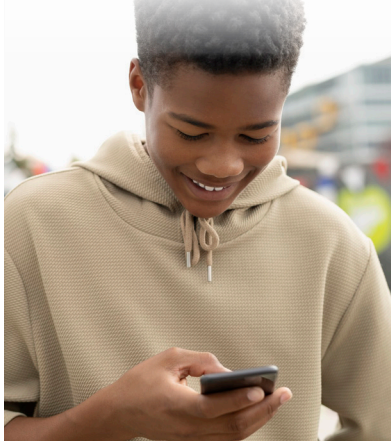
Support



If your teens say they need you, make yourself available. Remind them that you are in their corner and available to help with problems and decisions. Let them know that you do not expect perfection. When they make mistakes, help them to learn important lessons and to think about ways not to make the same mistakes again.

No matter how old they are, teens need their parents' support. Although they may think they are ready to take on the world, they know they are not ready to do it without their parents' help. Being there to help when your teens need it, allowing them to make mistakes along the way, is helping them to gain the strength they need to be independent from you when the time comes.

Seek Solutions



Tell your teens that you want to work through the problem with them. Let them know that you believe there is a way to solve it. Talk together about what each of you thinks might make things better. Try out some of your ideas. If you find that you and your teens are not able to find a solution that works, find other people who can help. Family members, friends, or professionals can assist you and your teens to work through difficult problems.

There are solutions to problems no matter how difficult. You will be better able to help your teens work through problems if you believe there are ways to resolve them. Communicating this belief helps teens to feel better about their abilities to make positive changes in their lives.



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