

Family Pack – Communicating with your adolescent

“During adolescence the vocabulary of my son fell to three words, ‘What?’, ‘Dunno’ and ‘Boring’”

- Bryan. Parent of Jacob (age 13)

This family pack will describe successful ways to actively listen to and talk with your teenagers. You will also read more about the importance of getting to know your children and creating a special bond with them so they can talk more often and openly with you about issues that concern them.

Most teenagers agree they want to spend more time with their parents. You may be surprised to learn that a recent study indicated that most teenagers rate “not having enough time together with parents as their top concern.”

Many teenagers are just glad their parents care enough to make the effort to spend time with them even if they are sometimes difficult to communicate with.

Communication is more than just asking about what your teenager has been doing, it’s also asking about what they’ve been thinking and are feeling. The common complaint from teenagers is that their parents don’t listen to them.

Communicating with your adolescent

- Listening with an open mind
- Getting the conversation started
- Tough topics

Talk ‘with’ not ‘to’ your teenager

The parent who “talks with” as opposed to “talks to” their teenager is usually listening a whole lot more than talking. This allows you to find out what your teenager is thinking, feeling or wanting from you. This style of communication will enhance your relationship.

The parent who “talks to” the teenager is usually reminding, threatening, blaming, ordering or judging. This hinders rather than promotes communication.

“My son began to grunt and my daughter could only shrug. This was my introduction to adolescence. I got used to that, I would talk, and they would grunt and shrug. Then one day my daughter spoke. She said, “You never listen to what I have to say.” I was so relieved she could speak I just rushed over and hugged her.”

- Craig. Parent of Sarah and David

Listening with an open mind

Emotions often run high during adolescence because both parents and teenagers want to be heard, understood and accepted. If this is to be achieved, parents must listen with an open mind recognising the feelings behind what their teenagers are saying, as well as what they are not saying.

Let your teenager know you will listen and try to understand their point of view, without putting them down or trying to control them. Be aware of which issues are not being discussed and have the courage to start a chat about those issues.

When disagreements arise, listening does not mean you give up your authority as a parent. It does mean giving your teenager a voice in matters that concern them. Even when agreement cannot be reached, teenagers are more likely to do what their parents wish if they feel that their parents listened to them with an open mind.



Getting the conversation started

"I used to be close with my daughter. She would talk with me about everything. Now she's 14 and avoids me. She is quiet at dinner and then goes to her room or talks with friends on the phone all evening. Sometimes she gets moody and angry. I want to reach her the way I used to, but I don't know how to start."

Carona. Parent of Shana (age 14)

Sometimes the solution is easy:

- Spend more time together.
- Suggest doing things you both enjoy.
- Talk about your day. Ask your teenager about his or her day. Dinnertime is an excellent opportunity for that kind of exchange.
- Tune in. Be sure the television is turned off and you and your teenager are tuned in to each other.

"We always had the T.V. on during dinner because Dad insisted on watching the news. I suggested we record the news. Dad still got to watch the news, only now we could all communicate and enjoy dinner together."

- Sharon (age 14)

Regularly talking with and listening to your teenagers helps them to know they can talk with you about the positive and the difficult things that happen to them each day. Some teenagers have a hard time expressing anger and upset feelings, keeping their feelings bottled inside. Parents need to draw such children out. Try to start a conversation by saying "I can see you've been upset. Let's talk about what's happening."

Some teenagers, however, may give parents the 'cold shoulder'. If that happens, be patient and be persistent until you break through. If you can't break through, there could be a more serious problem than embarrassment or a difficulty communicating.

Top Tips For Talking With Your Teenager

1. **Express enthusiasm.** Always show your teenagers that you enjoy talking with them.
2. **Be available.** Let your teenagers know it is not just when they are in trouble or having problems, that you want to know what is going on in their lives.
3. **Encourage general conversation.** Ask your teenagers their opinion on events, interesting subjects and general daily issues so they feel their opinion is valued.
4. **Try to talk in casual situations.** Teenagers usually talk more in casual situations such as driving in the car or doing something outside. Arrange opportunities to share time with your teenagers when you can talk while doing an enjoyable activity together.
5. **Talk shoulder to shoulder.** Teenagers will often talk more freely when you sit or walk shoulder to shoulder, rather than standing facing each other.
6. **Ask questions that need a sentence answer.** Ask questions that start with 'what' or 'how', rather than ones that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'.
Try some of these:
 - What happened at school today?
 - Who did you spend time with at lunchtime today?
 - What do you think about...?
 - It sounds like you are pretty unhappy, what has been going on?
 - How can we make things better?
7. **Set a good example.** Teenagers learn from watching people they love and admire. Set an example in the way you speak to your family and other adults you would want your teenager to copy.

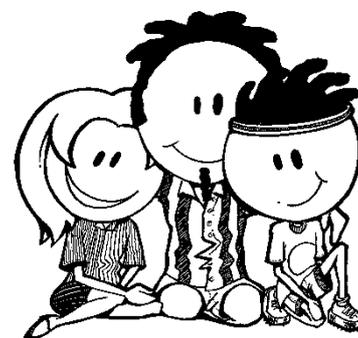
Tough Topics

Parents can become frustrated when they try to talk about an issue with their teenager and he or she just won't open up. These are 'tough topics', however, need to be discussed. Ideally, parents should find times and ways to talk with their teenagers before serious problems occur. Remember, it is never too late to start.

Often "teachable moments" happen during day-to-day activities. For example, you could discuss social issues, like bullying, when you see incidents of bullying behaviour in the presence of your family, or in a movie, or when you see a newspaper story about an incident caused by violent behaviour. You could discuss violence and better ways of solving problems, after watching a TV show or movie that portrays violence or verbal abuse as a solution to a disagreement.

If your teenager doesn't want to talk, try to be clear that your purpose is to build understanding and to be supportive. If you can't nudge your teenager into talking, back off for a while. Then give your son or daughter some time to think it over. A few days later, you can try to start the discussion again. Parents can be flexible in getting the chat going, but should not give up on the need for this discussion to eventually begin. Be patient with them and they will open up.

Although it may be harder to get boys to open up, parents should engage in conversations with their sons and daughters alike.



Top Tips For Navigating Tough Topics

- * **Let your teenager talk.** Try not to interrupt even if you don't agree with what is being said. Allow them to use words to describe how they feel.
- * **Acknowledge your teenagers' efforts to communicate** Tell them you are proud of them and are glad they have talked to you about it.
- * **Check your understand what your teenagers have said.** Summarise what your teenagers said to check you have understood. Remember, don't lay judgement when repeating by using a sarcastic tone or a disapproving look.
- * **Check your teenagers understand what you have said.** Ask them to explain to you what they think you have said.
- * **Use your voice and actions carefully.** Talk calmly, use caring words and listen attentively. A soft voice and a relaxed tone can help calm a situation.
- * **Make use of 'cooling off' time.** When you or your teenagers are feeling angry or upset, consider using a 'cooling off' time before you try to talk.
- * **Tell your teenagers what to do rather than what not to do.**
Try:
 - "Please speak to me with a quiet, calm voice" rather than "don't yell at me"
 - "Please put the chair legs on the floor" rather than "don't swing on your chair"
- * **Encourage and role model positive language.**
Try:
 - "I really liked the way you asked your brother if you could play his guitar"
 - "I love seeing you guys getting along"
- * **Ask your teenagers permission before giving them advice.** Sometimes as parents we offer our teenagers advice without seeing if they want it or are ready for it. Statements like "would you like me to tell you about some things I have tried that seemed to work?" make teenagers feel like they have some control, especially in difficult situations.