Communicating with teenagers

For many parents, the teenage years are a time when the open, loving chats they used to share with their children are replaced with secrecy, eye-rolling and dramatic sighs. Communication lines get crossed or s feeling as though they are not being heard.



Teens often resist communication with parents and adults. This is a normal stage in which they are developing their identity and independence. But with a few simple strategies and a little effort, you can help prevent or mend communication breakdowns with your teen.

Set ground rules. Although they'll never admit to it, children and teens crave rules. Reasonable boundaries, such as a curfew, household duties, etc; show kids you have expectations of them and that you're concerned about their well-being. Of course, most teens try to test these limits. When they do, it's vital that the rewards and consequences of following or breaking the rules are clearly defined, fair and predictable.

Really listen. Offer your complete attention for matters big and small. Resist the urge to "lecture" or belittle problems that may seem trivial to you in the moment. Try to keep an open mind. The fact that your teen is opening the door of communication is a critical first step. Don't slam it shut with an insensitive or judgmental comment. Stay calm and focus in on what they're really telling you and respond with empathy and understanding. Help them to problem solve by providing options rather than dictating.

Pick your battles. Ask yourself if your child's nose ring or messy room is really as big an issue as drugs, alcohol or sex. If you overreact to smaller issues, your teen is much less likely to come to you with big ones. Hold firm on truly important standards (e.g., curfew, drug use, etc.) but be more flexible with matters that, in the big scheme of things, aren't life-altering. Let them make some of their own mistakes on non life-threatening issues.

Take time to praise. It's easy to get so caught up in what your teen's not doing right, that you forget to mention the good things. Tell them when you're proud of them, celebrate successes, and remind them often that you love them.

Create communication opportunities. Take time out to regularly connect as a family. Try activities that encourage one on one communication. Family meetings are a great chance to set guidelines, discuss what's working and what's not and re-evaluate priorities. Make sure everyone gets equal speaking time and has a say in decisions. Watch for signs that your teen wants to talk, even if they are not verbal. If your teen is hovering around or being very affectionate, they may be looking for an opportunity to bring something up. Don't raise contentious issues at a time of stress or in front of others.

Put yourself in their shoes. Times change, but many of the issues teens face today are not that different from what you went through. Think back to defining moments in your teenage years—your first breakup, the pressure to fit in, dealing with "unfair" teachers, etc.—and remind yourself how important those issues were at the time. Share these moments with your teen.

Though they may not entirely believe it, relating stories from your own adolescence will help your teenager realize you understand what they're going through because you were a teen once too. When the lines are open you can also admit to your own flaws and mistakes and be open about your feelings in return.

The teen years are a difficult and confusing time. Teens are changing emotionally, dealing with new issues and decisions and forming new relationships. They are often pulling away and developing new facets to their identity. Just remember that their relationship with their parents is still the most important in their life. Striking a balance between providing guidance and allowing freedom can be challenging. As you go from parenting a child to relating to a young adult, take pride in the role you have in shaping that person and nurturing that relationship.