Tuning into your teen

You're sitting in your favourite chair reading the paper when the door slams and your teen runs past and up the stairs without stopping to say hello or even glancing your way. You wonder what happened to the delightful child that used to come to you for love and support.



Although this kind of behaviour may be a source of frustration for some parents, the reality is that this is fairly common among teens as they begin to develop their own sense of identity in the larger world around them. The good news for parents is that relationships with their teens can be improved and maintained with the help of positive communication.

Positive communication is essential for parents and teens to better understand and respect each other's needs and wants, particularly during this period of adjustment when teens struggle with their parents, their peers, and even themselves, to desperately understand and keep up with the changes they are experiencing.

Try some of the following positive communication tips to help your relationship with your teen. Studies show that your support and guidance is one of the most important things you can offer your teen as they transition into adulthood.

Make communication routine. With both your lives full of appointments, school, work and friends there are probably days when you only spend five minutes together in the car. So why not turn that five minutes into quality conversation time. Communication should be natural, occur daily and be about everything. Ask teens open-ended questions about their day, plans for the weekend, what they want for dinner or thoughts on tougher issues like world events.

Actively listen. Offer your full attention when you talk to your teen. Eye contact and body language are extremely important, along with paraphrasing what your teen has said, showing empathy, and demonstrating a non-judgmental attitude.

Be clear. Research shows that teens that know what is expected of them are less likely to get into trouble so make sure you're clear on the rules. It gives them a chance to rise to, or fail to meet, your expectations and face the consequences. Try creating action plans where you both have agreed on a set of rules and responsibilities. This can be used if they want a later curfew or permission to use the car. At the same time, the process will help them develop decision making and problem solving skills. Most importantly, if a consequence has been laid out make sure you follow through.

Show respect. Teens won't want to open up if they feel that you are trying to control their every move. Respect their privacy as much as possible. Moreover, don't discount your teen's feelings or belittle the importance of minor events like a school dance or a new haircut. Treating your teenager with respect will help build self-confidence and a sense of self-worth that can shape future success. It also helps to set an example that ensures you receive respect in return.

Learning to respect and trust your teen to make the right decisions and learn from their mistakes will allow them to feel comfortable coming to you when they need help. By opening up the lines of communication between you and your teen, you will be on the path to building a stronger foundation for your relationship.