



How to Talk to Your Teen

Raising a teenager can sometimes feel like walking through a maze. Parents are constantly confronted with unexpected twists and turns, and sometimes you feel as though your efforts lead to nowhere. Although adolescence is challenging for parents and teens alike, there are steps that parents can take to navigate the teen years more smoothly.

Open and honest communication is essential for surviving — and thriving — during the teen years. By learning how to speak openly with your teen about difficult topics, you can help make getting through these years easier for both you and your child. Here are some recommendations for improving communication with your teenager:

Listen

Listening is probably the most important skill a parent can have. Understanding what your child is communicating or even what they are not communicating is crucial to assessing where your child is emotionally at any given time. Silence can send as loud a message as an outburst. Parents must ask themselves, what did our child talk about in the past and why isn't he or she talking about it anymore? What particular topics prompt our child to shut down?

Talk about the tough topics

Parents often become guarded about difficult topics such as drugs and sex because they feel that talking about it will prompt their child to start thinking about them or experimenting. The reality is that children are bombarded with images, discussion and opportunities to get involved in dangerous activities every day. Talking about them openly and honestly may encourage them to speak to you before they act.

If you don't feel informed enough on a particular topic, then seek out resources such as friends, relatives, pastors or books to help you gain the knowledge necessary to be more comfortable with discussing the subject with your teen. Once you have the information you need, make difficult topics a part of your normal day-to-day conversations. It is much harder for teenagers to adjust to the sudden interjection of potentially embarrassing subjects than it is if you talk about them regularly.

Events in everyday life offer opportunities for discussion that should not be passed up. For example, situations that your teen's friends are experiencing or books and movies about difficult topics can be good ways to initiate a conversation. Parents should also talk about their own mistakes with their children to demonstrate that learning from mistakes and making better decisions in the future are the ultimate goals of growing up.

Topics to be aware of:

- Drugs/alcohol/smoking
- Sexuality
- Relationships with friends and family
- Spirituality
- School/plans for the future
- Money
- Movies/music/hobbies

Keep your cool

Despite your best efforts, there will still be times when your child may be uncomfortable or even obstinate when it comes to discussing a particular topic. In situations like these, parents must approach the situation in a calm and mature manner.

If your teen displays hostility or aggressive behavior, above all else remain calm and in control of your emotions. You should not allow your emotions to match your child's in intensity or aggression. Remember that you are a role model for how your child handles conflict in the future. Parents should avoid arguments even when their child is putting all of his or her effort into making the discussion combative.

If necessary, give your child time to cool off. Parents should not push a child to continue a discussion if it is escalating to the point of screaming or physical violence. When your child has calmed down, ask how he or she is feeling or what is going on in the situation. Listen without interruption or judgment.

Give teens a voice

Remember that it is OK for your child to have feelings — even when those feelings make you uncomfortable. Parents should never argue with a child about his or her feelings. You should acknowledge your child's feelings and realize that understanding their feelings does not necessarily mean that you feel the same way.

It is important that parents not act shocked or begin lecturing when talking to their teenager. Lecturing seldom serves to do anything other than make children less likely to talk openly with their parents. Parents should make their views and value systems known, but should do this without neglecting their child's feelings.

Seek outside help

If you are still having trouble getting through to your teen, it may be time to consider outside help.

Any of the following situations is a good reason to seek assistance: your child displays sudden, unexplained changes in behavior; a structure of basic rules and consequences is not working; other people are stating concerns; you suspect drug use; your child has become aggressive with you; or your child is in legal trouble.

Important things to remember

Forming a relationship based on trust and respect through daily interaction and interest in your child's activities is the most important thing a parent can do to make communication easier. Even in difficult times, remember to express your love for your child and enjoy the challenge of being a parent.

Robyn Warner, M.S. devoted a great deal of her career to the healing and restoration of children and their families. For more information about Three Springs, please call (888) 758-4356.