

COMMUNICATING WITH TEENAGERS

Raising adolescents can be a stressful and difficult time for many families. It's important to remember that the physical and psychological changes your teenage child is going through can be stressful and overwhelming for them, their peers and other family members.

Often, it can seem hard to reach out and engage with a teen or young adult because you are so accustomed to thinking of them as your child and communicating with them in the way you always have. Their push-back or rebellion against this can feel like a rejection of you or your skills as a parent.

Teenagers' Growing Independence

Young people experiment with different activities, friendships, ideas or beliefs as they move through adolescence towards adulthood. This is a normal and important process of their developing independence. However, it can be challenging and stressful, especially when their experimentation runs counter to our own ideals or expectations, or if it ventures into risk-taking or antisocial behaviour.

Unfortunately, there is no easy way through this and no simple solution that works for every family. Every teenager is an individual. In fact, you may find that one child's experience of adolescence is completely different to an older or younger sibling's experience at the same stage.

Issues affecting communication with Teenagers

Adolescence and puberty is a period of rapid and significant physical and mental change for a young person, and presents a number of challenges for parents. It can be hard to let-go of your role as a parent of your young child, and this in turn may make your teenage child feel overwhelmed or smothered.

Parents of young adults and teenagers need to remember that

1. All children must eventually grow up

We want to raise our children to become resilient, self-sufficient and capable adults. Part of this process involves allowing them to become more independent and helping them discover the sort of person they want to become.

2. Decisions can be made together

This period in your teenager's life does not need to be all give and no take. You can discuss issues with them and offer them the opportunity to negotiate new boundaries or freedoms while providing them with an awareness of their new responsibilities and an agreement about accountability. This is a crucial skill for later in life, so it's important to begin teaching them now.

3. Young people will try new things

Teenagers may adopt different belief systems, ideological viewpoints or simply engage with different media or music tastes which clash with your own. They may also insist on dressing differently or associate themselves with new causes. This is all normal, and a way for young people to experiment and discover who they are. Try to see this as a good thing; they are learning to be their own person.

4. You will always feel responsible for your child

Don't feel ashamed by your desire to protect your teenage child like you used to when they were younger. You will always feel this way. Try to be supportive though and limit your criticism of their decisions and choices. They will hopefully learn valuable lessons from their mistakes, if you let them!



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Tips for Communicating with Teens

1. Make time to spend together.

Teenagers are often very busy with school, sport, hobbies and socialising. All of these are important aspects of a well-rounded life, and you should encourage them to stay involved with as many different groups or activities as they have the energy for; it's important for their growth and development to have a wide range of experiences.

However, their busy lives can sometimes come at the cost of quiet time at home with family or the chance to talk things over with you, their parent.

Try to make conversation with them over breakfast or dinner, or drive them to and from the places they're going so you can talk in the car.

2. Give them privacy and their own space

This is a key sign of respect and acknowledging they're becoming adults; knock before you go into their room, for example, and try to avoid being nosy about things they may consider personal or private. It's also important for them to have somewhere that is their own to retreat to when they have an argument with a parent or a sibling while they cool off.

3. Be a loving parent

Stay involved with their lives; listen to their music, watch their TV shows, and go to their weekend sport. Celebrate their achievements and encourage them to excel at school.

Like everyone else, adolescents need to feel loved. Tell them often, and demonstrate your love with whatever physical contact they feel comfortable with. This may depend on the context; they may want a hug when they get home but not when they're being picked up from school.

4. Have fun with them

Make time for leisure and laughter. Keep sharing new experiences with them to sustain rapport and interconnectedness.

Tips for Listening to Teens

1. Listen more than you speak

Parents are used to guiding and instructing their children, but as your teenage child is becoming a young adult, it's important they are able to express their feelings and opinions. As they get older, these feelings and opinions will become more complex and well-rounded.

They need to know that you will be able to listen to them on their level as they mature and that you will treat and respect them as adults as they get older.

2. Take the time to really listen

Stop what you're doing and give your teenager your full attention. Look them in the eyes and don't rush to interrupt. Take on board their perspective and engage with their opinions.

3. Avoid angry or impatient body language

Don't roll your eyes or sigh, it has a bigger impact on them than you may realise.

4. Respect their opinion

Adolescents have strong opinions, which they're entitled to. Begin to engage with them as you would a friend or colleague, with respect and open-mindedness. They may have very well thought-out opinions or have spent a great deal of time learning about a new idea or perspective. This should be encouraged and respected.

5. Avoid criticising them all the time.

Try using 'I' statements rather than 'You' statements and engage with them as you would an adult friend or colleague, while still saying what you need to as a parent. For example, instead of "You're so inconsiderate, you never tell me where you're going", try saying to them, "I worry about you if I don't know where you are".

6. Avoid sarcasm, yelling and assumptions.

These don't facilitate a healthy relationship. Listen, engage and relate to your teen.

