

Are You Talking With Your Teen?

Parent communication is important!

Adolescence is a time for young people to explore decision-making, relationships, and their identity. Sometimes, if young people feel like they don't have any connection to their families, home, or school they may turn to risky behaviors. Parents who talk openly and caringly with their teens help create a warm, loving home; their teens will also feel better about themselves and make healthier lifestyle choices.

One study showed that teens who felt like their parents were hostile and *NOT* warm were more likely to have negative social behaviors and decreased peer acceptance.ⁱ

African-American teen girls who live with mothers in a supportive family had increased communication with a sex partner about sexual risk, decreased sex with a non-steady partner, and decreased unprotected sex with a steady partner.ⁱⁱ

Teens who feel connected to their families, initiate sex later, are less likely to become pregnant, use cigarettes/marijuana, or drink alcohol frequently.^{iii,iv}

Teens with parents who are warm, firm, and allowed some independence were better in school, reported lower levels of depression and anxiety, and had higher self-esteem and self-reliance than teens whose parents did not demonstrate those qualities.^v

It is important that parents talk with teens. Teens *want* information and a close relationship with their parents. Teens look for support and guidance from close adults in their lives.^{vi} A national survey showed that pre-teens and teens want more information on puberty, guns in school, and racism/discrimination.^{vii} This study also showed that over 50% of teens remember conversations with their parents about reproduction, discrimination, teasing/bullying, guns in schools and alcohol/drugs.^{viii} Teens need clear information on the important issues in their lives; parents play a key role in delivering that information.

Check in with yourself before you talk

Sometimes your own opinions and personal experiences can stand in the way of being an open listener. If teens feel judged by their parents or guardians, they are less likely to share information that may be sensitive or embarrassing. That is why it is so important that teens see parents as approachable and open to questions and discussions. Here are some ways to check in with yourself before you talk about tough issues with your teen.

How do you feel? Think through your own opinions on subjects that you might talk about with your teen. Remember to think about memories and personal experiences that may shape your opinions and reactions. Keep in mind that your experiences may be different from your teen's experiences. Before effectively talking with youth, you need to know how you feel.

What was I doing when I was 16? Have you thought about what you want to share with your teenager? Keep in mind where your teen is developmentally. It is generally more appropriate to share personal experiences after early adolescence (approx. ages 10-14).

Are you talking with your teen? Make sure that conversations are two-sided. Spend as much time listening as you do talking. The key to good communication with your teen is hearing and understanding what he or she is saying.

Do you make assumptions? Always ask your teen what they are doing instead of assuming the worst. Respond to what your teen tells you and try not to jump to conclusions. Pay attention to your teen's values and their decision-making habits. Trust that they can make the right decision with accurate information. They will trust you if they see that you give them consistent clear and accurate information.

Are you willing to get help for any problems that you may have? It's important to model behaviors for your teen. If you are worried about your teen's substance use, check in with yourself if you use substances. When a teen sees that their parent will ask for help, it will encourage them to ask for help if they need it.

Tips for talking with your teen:

Don't be afraid to start the conversation. It's never too late to start a conversation. Starting conversations about tough subjects like sex and relationships will let your teen know that it is ok to talk about them.

Create a safe environment. Teens won't want to talk if they feel they will be judged or put-down. Create an environment in which teens feel they can ask any question.

Share your beliefs and values. Take pride in your family customs. Share your family's history with your teen.

Give factual information. Give teens truthful answers when they ask questions. Don't worry if you don't have the answers. Being honest will develop a sense of trust between you and your teen.

Listen to your teen. Spend time just listening to what your teen is feeling, experiencing, etc. Appreciate and acknowledge your teen's interests, strengths, humor, etc.

Bring up subjects over and over again. Don't be afraid to bring up important topics that you have already talked about. This gives your teen an opportunity to talk about things up he or she may not have mentioned.

ⁱ Paley B, Conger RD, Harold GT. Parents' Affect, Adolescent Cognitive Representations, and Adolescent Social Development. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (August 2000) 62:761-776.

ⁱⁱ DeVore ER, Ginsburg KR. The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Curr Opin Pediatr* (2005) 17:460-465.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Riesch SK, Anderson LS, Krueger HA. Parent-Child Communication Processes: Preventing Children's Health-Risk Behavior. *J Spec Pediatr Nurs* (January 2006) Vol 11, No 1.

^v Lagina N. Parent-Child Communication: Promoting Sexually Healthy Youth. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, August 2002.

^{vi} DeVore ER, Ginsburg KR. The protective effects of good parenting on adolescents. *Curr Opin Pediatr* (2005) 17:460-465.

^{vii} Kaiser Family Foundation, Nickelodeon, and Children Now. *Talking with Kids about Tough Issues: a National Survey of Parents and Kids*. Menlo Park, California: The Foundation, 2001.

