



# COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEENAGER

If you're the parent of an adolescent, you may feel as if an explosion has ripped through your relationship with your child. It's no surprise when you consider the powerful forces tugging you and your youngster in opposite directions. Your teenager is reaching for power; you are trying to maintain control. You want your child to conform; your child wants to be different. You feel that your child needs more responsibility; they want more freedom. Eventually, the tension erupts - a noisy argument followed by a sulking teenager stalking off to self-imposed exile in their room. If you're unprepared, you can be bewildered by such abrupt changes in a once-compliant youngster. It hurts when the child who always admired you suddenly seems to reject you and your values, but take heart - Your child needs your guidance now more than ever. The key is skillful communication even when it may seem unwanted.

1. **Question sparingly.** It's natural for a parent to be intimidated by and anxious about a child's push for independence. As a consequence, you want to know what your child is doing, thinking, and planning. But the more questions you ask a teenager, the less information you get. Resist the urge to interrogate.
2. **Don't retaliate with criticism.** Particularly in early adolescence, teenagers are highly dissatisfied with the world and their place in it. They are extremely unsure of themselves and take comfort in acting dissatisfied with everyone else. "That's stupid" becomes the refrain and such criticism can create more criticism, if you fall into the trap. Don't lower your child's self-esteem further by reacting defensively.
3. **Persist in giving guidance.** Offer advice, even when it's unwelcome. Don't become indifferent after you've been rebuffed. Your teenager still needs feedback from a caring adult. All children do is listen to their parents, whether they let you know it or not (it can be too painful a loss of face to acknowledge that you were right all along).
4. **Keep on trusting.** It's a fact that a teenager at one time or another will lie, perhaps unthinkingly simply to obtain a privilege or avoid punishment. Parents usually view lying as more of a moral issue than their child does. If you catch your teenager in a lie, confront the issue. Make sure there are consequences, but also





work to rebuild trust. A child whose parents tell them they'll never trust them again eventually decides, "They don't trust me anyway so I might as well lie."

5. **Be accessible.** Your son asks you a loaded question while you're driving in the car or shopping at the supermarket. Why? Head-to-head formal discussion can be painfully awkward for a teenager. And teens are mercurial - they tend to blurt things out at inappropriate times. Often, when the focus is on something else, it's easier for a teenager to confide in you. Be receptive to the question, no matter how off-beat it may seem to you.
6. **Talk about yourself.** "All we ever talk about is me," complains the teenager. It's usually true due to worried parents' heightened curiosity and anxiety. Try talking about yourself - especially your own fears and anxieties or memories of similar feelings you had as a kid. Your teenager may relax a bit and open up more.
7. **Listen without jumping.** What happens when your daughter asks you a question about contraceptives? The temptation is to insist on finding out immediately why she wants to know without ever answering the question at hand. That's a mistake. Try to respond directly without interrogating. Then calmly ask why she wants to know.
8. **Don't argue needlessly.** Teenagers are experts at drawing parents into arguments. It's vital to be firm about what's negotiable and what's not. A two hour row with your 16 year old about buying them an unaffordable new car just raises their investment in the matter. Your wisest approach: State your position on such matters briefly and don't argue with your son.
9. **Take a breather from the conflict.** Sometimes you need to call a truce. Try to share an activity that's mostly physical - fishing, tennis, jogging, bowling or whatever. You'll feel refreshed after an activity where you enjoyed each other's company but didn't say anything of consequence.

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