



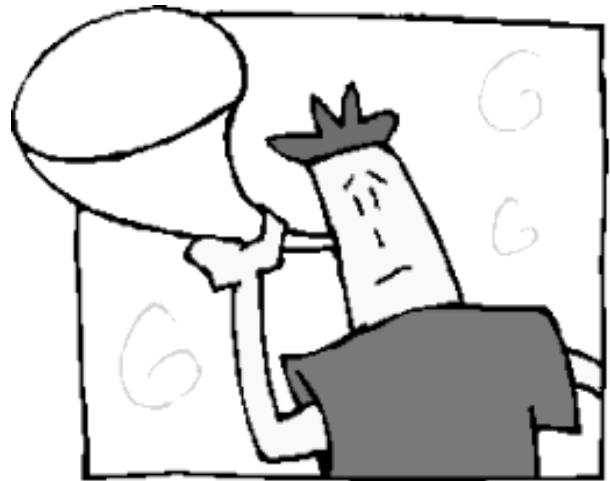
Living With Your Teen:

Talking With Teens

The way adults talk with teens affects the way teens feel about themselves and other people. When adults talk with teens in respectful and helpful ways, they feel good about themselves and others. When adults talk in harmful ways, teens feel badly about themselves and about others.

Talk in respectful and helpful ways

If you have no problems talking with your teen, then you don't need to change your ways. If you do have problems you may find it hard to change. After all, you have been talking with your child in a certain way for more than 10 years.



Try the helpful ways discussed below. Practice them until they become natural. Remember, what works well for one person may not work for another. Use the tips that work for you and your teen.

Express acceptance in words and actions

Let teens know you accept them – no matter what. Acceptance is love. You can accept teens just as they are, as worthwhile individuals, even though you may not always approve of their behavior or actions.

For example, you accept Sue as a person even though you don't approve of her taste in music. Or you love and accept Jim, but you don't approve of his behavior when he comes in two hours after curfew. Let young people know you love them even when you disapprove of their behavior.

Acceptance makes it possible to talk with teens in a helpful and respectful way. Let your words and your actions show you love them. Young people are never too old to be told "I love you" or to get a hug or a pat on the shoulder.

Talk to teens as you talk to your friend

Few adults would think of shaming, lecturing or threatening their friends. If they did, they wouldn't have friends for long. Yet many adults think nothing of shaming, lecturing or threatening their teens.

For example, when Bob comes in two hours late, you threaten “Bob, if you can’t come home on time, I won’t let you have the car for a month!” Threats don’t help the situation. Say to Bob, as you would to a friend “I’m glad you’re home. I was very worried about you. We’ll talk about your being late in the morning.”

Learn to listen

Listening is more important than talking. Really listening is difficult. It takes effort and concentration. Sit down with your adolescent, face to face, and give him or her your full attention. Listening is especially important when teens are frustrated, angry, anxious, hurt or sad; when they have problems; when you don’t understand what they are saying; or when you are frustrated, angry, anxious, hurt or sad

When teens are upset or have problems, listening is the most helpful thing you can do for them. Encourage your adolescent to talk about his or her concerns. Troubles seem to grow lighter when your teen is able to talk about them.

Listening means hearing the feelings and meaning behind the words. Often they aren’t the same. For example, Tim said to his father, “Why can’t I stay out until midnight? None of my friends has to come in at eleven. You always treat me like a child.” His words sound as if he were criticizing his father, but he meant something like this, “I feel like you don’t trust me. I want you to treat me like a responsible person.”

His father’s first impulse was to say “You’ll come in when I tell you to!” However, if he listens to the meaning behind his son’s words, he might respond, “Let’s sit down and talk about this situation. It sounds as if you think I don’t trust you to be out until midnight. Am I right?” By responding to the meaning and feeling rather than the words, Tim and his father are better able to work out the problem. When adults listen, they are sending the young person this message, “I am concerned about what you think and feel. You are important to me.”

Listen more than you talk

Sometimes parents are afraid to listen to their children. They’re afraid of what they might hear. They might learn their teens are drinking, using drugs, failing in school, sexually active or feeling depressed. Parents may be afraid of the pain they will feel if they learn this information. They may be frightened for their children. They may be worried they won’t be able to help their teens or to correct the situation. Yet, the consequences of not listening to teens are great. Find the time to listen.

Teens’ problems may be small or large. Listening helps parents to understand their teens better and it gives parents information about helpful ways to respond.

Create opportunities to be alone with your teen. It gives your teen a chance to talk and gives you a chance to listen. Wash dishes together or go fishing. Use time in the car together to talk. How can you know what your teen is thinking or feeling if you never have a chance to talk quietly together? When teens get a sympathetic ear, they are likely to pour out their feelings, examine their problems, and then come up with solutions.

Use suggestions, not orders

Adults are good at giving orders, but teens don’t like being ordered about any more than adults do. Parents who try to control their children through ordering are interfering with their teens’ development

of critical thinking skills. Teens won't learn to solve problems, make decisions and consider the consequences of their actions unless they develop these skills. They will depend on others to tell them what to do and say, rather than making decisions based on personal and family values. It's important to ask rather than order. Also, show respect by using words such as *please* and *thank you*. Show appreciation when your teen responds to your suggestions.

Tell teens about their good qualities

Sometimes adults expect teens to know they are loved without being told in words. Being provided with a home, food and clothing doesn't mean your teen knows he or she is loved. Either do hugs and kisses or a ride to the ball game. Your teen can't read your mind and may not realize you are expressing your love by providing for him or her. Your actions as well as the words, "I really love you!" lets your teen know how much he or she is loved.

When you are happy with your teen, say so. Expressing approval builds up your teen's self-concept. It encourages the development of qualities you admire and improves your relationship with your teen.



Monitor teens in a respectful and appropriate way

Research shows that teens whose parents monitor them are less likely to use illicit drugs and alcohol, become involved in delinquent behavior, engage in early sexual behavior, lie and cheat, submit to peer pressure to engage in negative activities, and do poorly in school.

Talk to your teen to learn *Who, What, When, and Where*. Parents need to know whom their teens are with, where they are, what they are doing and when they are doing it. Parental monitoring doesn't mean demanding obedience, attempting to control a teen's choices and behavior, or imposing a parent's will on the teen. When parents monitor their teens in warm and kind ways, teens interpret their parents' monitoring as showing interest in them and caring for them, rather than being intrusive.

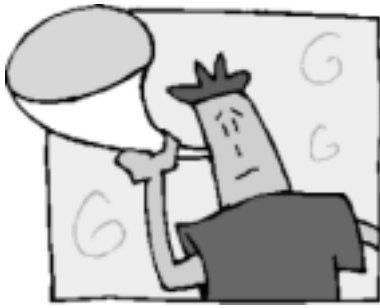
Parents can monitor teens by asking the who, what, when, and where questions, calling them by phone to see if their teens have changed plans, calling parents of their teens' friends to gain agreement and/or information on expectations and limits, and dropping by to see if teens are where they say they are going to be.

Express anger in a constructive way

Everyone gets angry at times, and it's better to express anger than to suppress it until you explode. But express your anger constructively.

Here is an easy way to express anger without saying something you will feel sorry for later: (1) First, tell what happened. (2) Then, tell how you feel. (3) Finally, tell why you feel that way. For example, say:

- When you come home late, I feel worried because I think you've had an accident.
- When you left without mowing the lawn on Saturday, I felt angry because if it rains tomorrow, I'll have to look at a shaggy lawn all week.
- When you leave the kitchen messy, I feel frustrated because I have to clean up the kitchen before I start supper. That takes time and energy that I don't have.



Always wait until you have calmed down before talking with your son or daughter. It's hard to think clearly and express your feelings appropriately when you are upset or angry. When you are upset, do what you can to calm down.

Then use the "1,2,3" way explained above to express your anger. When you use this way of expressing anger to your teen, he or she will learn to use the method also. It is a great way to reduce conflict.

Be careful to not use physical violence to express your anger. Hitting or slapping teens causes them to feel unloved and discourages the development of positive self-concepts. Teens may react to physical violence by retaliating, acting aggressively towards others, or trying to avoid the person who has punished them. If conversations with your teen are explosive and violent, seek help from a counselor.

Speak out

Talk to your teen about your values. You can't assume your son or daughter knows what your values are by watching you. If an act is illegal or unethical, speak out clearly with disapproval. Let your teen know your standards relating to such things as drugs, sexual behavior, obeying the law and cheating. Use a conversational tone when you discuss your values with your teen. If you raise your voice, get emotional or give a lecture, he or she will tune you out.

Don't get upset if your teen's values are different from yours. Considering many different values before settling on a personal value system is part of the growing-up process. Teens may not always support your values, but it is important that they know what your values are. Research shows that teens may question the values of their parents but, in time, most teens accept or incorporate their parents' values into their own value system.

Avoid unkind words that put down teens

Unkind words have unhappy results. They hurt and humiliate your teen. They don't help any situation; they only make it worse. Avoid unkind words such as:

- Criticism: "You eat like a pig."
- Ridicule: "You're acting like a baby."
- Shame: "You ought to be ashamed."
- Namecalling: "You're lazy."

Use kind words to build up your teen's self-concept

Kind words create happy results. They help teens feel good about themselves. They encourage open discussion and understanding. Examples of kind words include:

- "Thanks for cleaning up the kitchen. "
- "You did a thorough job. "
- "You thought a lot about that. "
- "You decided what is important for you."
- "Tell me about it. "

One psychologist advises using kind words four times for each time criticism or unkind words are used. Also, speak to teens in words appropriate for their age. Kind words for a young child, such as “You’re a sweetie pie,” may sound unkind to teens. Kind words communicate love and respect and make your home a more pleasant place for you and your teen.

The importance of good communication

Good communication helps teens develop confidence, feelings of self-worth and good relationships with others. It makes life with teens more pleasant. Learning to talk with teens in a helpful way may be difficult, but you can learn, and it’s worth the effort.

Sources: Publications on teen development by the University of Wisconsin Extension, Virginia Cooperative Extension Service and the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension

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