

Parenting - communicating with teenagers

Teenage years can be difficult for many families. Young people may develop ideas, values and beliefs that are different to those of their parents. This is part of the normal process of moving towards independence. Parents may struggle with how much independence they should allow their children at different ages and in different circumstances.

There is no prescription for this. Each young person is an individual and needs different advice. Communication with teenagers is different from communicating with younger children and can cause conflict and stress.

If you follow some simple tips, it may help to improve communication with your teenager. However, always seek professional advice if you are concerned about your family relationships.

Issues that can affect communication with teenagers

Adolescence is a time of rapid change, not just for the young person but for the parents too. It might be hard to let go sometimes, but parents need to recognise that:

- A child's job is to grow up and become an independent adult. As a parent, you need to help young people through this process.
- Decisions can now be made together. Try to discuss issues to reach an outcome that you and your teenager can both accept.
- Young people may have viewpoints that are different from yours or may take up activities that you don't understand. Try to see this as good thing. They are learning to be their own person.
- You will always feel responsible for your child's wellbeing and safety, no matter how old they are. When children reach their teenage years, they start to make their own decisions. Sometimes they make the wrong ones. Try to be supportive and not criticise. They will (hopefully!) learn valuable lessons from their mistakes.
- During this time of constant change, both parents and young people need to take time to care for themselves.
- You need to show you value your teenager and their uniqueness – show them your unconditional love.

General communication tips with teenagers

The most important thing is to keep the lines of communication open. Suggestions include:

- **Listen more than you speak** – remember that we are all given two ears and one mouth. This is to remind us that we should spend twice as much time listening as talking. This is especially important when talking to teenagers, who may tell us more if we are silent long enough to give them the opportunity.
- **Make time to spend together** – teenagers are often busy with school, friends and other interests, but you can have a conversation with them over breakfast and dinner. Offer to take them to or pick them up from places; this will provide other opportunities for conversations.
- **Give them privacy** – teenagers need their own space. For example, knock before you go into their room.
- **Keep up with their interests** – listen to their music, watch their television shows with them and turn up to their sports practise sessions. Continue to take an active interest in their life.

- **Be a loving parent** – adolescence is a time when young people often struggle with their changing sense of identity and need to feel loved. Tell them often. Demonstrate your love using whatever physical contact they are comfortable with. Celebrate their achievements, forgive their mistakes, listen to them when they have a problem and show interest in how they plan to solve it. Support them in their problem solving. Feeling included and special is vital for every young person's sense of positive self-esteem.
- **Have fun** – make time for leisure and laughter. Good feelings help to build good rapport.

Negative communication with teenagers

Conflict is inevitable when people with different views live together so the occasional clash with your teenager is normal and to be expected. However, ongoing conflict can undermine the relationship between a parent and a young person.

Negative communication is a common cause of chronic conflict. Examples of negative communication include nagging, harsh criticism or 'stand over' tactics such as yelling to force compliance.

It's not always easy to recognise negative communication. For example, well-meaning parents may criticise because they want their child to try harder. You are using negative communication if:

- The conversation rapidly deteriorates into nagging, yelling or fighting
- You feel angry, upset, rejected, blamed or unloved
- The issue under dispute doesn't ever improve.

Turn negatives into positives

You can change negative communication into positive communication. Suggestions include:

- Negotiate how you communicate with each other. Work out strategies to improve your communication. Brainstorm solutions together.
- Select what is important to argue over. A basic guideline is that safety issues, like not getting into a car with a driver who has been drinking, are always worth fighting over. Other things, like cleaning up the messy bedroom, might be best to ignore – just keep the door shut!
- Offer constructive criticism. Acknowledge and celebrate their achievements. They will know themselves when they have got it wrong and don't need to be reminded by you.
- Set a good example by apologising when you're wrong.

Update your opinion of their rights and freedoms

You need to willingly give teenagers the right of more freedom when they are ready to behave responsibly. For every right they gain, there is a responsibility that goes with it. Suggestions include:

- Establish reasonable house rules in consultation with your teenager. For example, decide together on an appropriate curfew for Saturday night.
- Be prepared to compromise when negotiating house rules with teenagers. (Try to give ground on the least important issues.)
- Stop and consider before you say 'no' to a request. Is your teenager now old enough or responsible enough for you to say 'yes' this time?
- If you do say 'no', tell them why – but remember, the parental cliché 'because I said so' is just asking for a fight! Give good reasons, such as using the safety argument.
- Help them to take care and responsibility for themselves. For example, talk about issues such as drink spiking or safe sex. Browse the Better Health Channel for appropriate fact sheets. Read the fact sheets together and talk about any concerns you both may have.

Listen more and talk less

Take the time to listen – you may be surprised how much teenagers will confide in you if they feel they are really being listened to. Suggestions include:

- Really listen when they talk to you. For example, stop what you're doing, look them in the eye and don't interrupt.
- Avoid angry or impatient body language. For example, don't roll your eyes or sigh.
- Appreciate that your teenager has a different world view. Treat them as you would a friend and respect their opinions. They may have very well-thought-through opinions that are just different to yours.
- Use 'I' statements rather than 'you' statements. For example, don't say: 'You're so inconsiderate, you never tell me where you're going'. Instead, say: 'If I don't know where you are, I worry about you'.
- Avoid sarcasm, criticism and yelling.
- Don't assume or mind read. Listen.
- Young people will stop talking if you don't listen respectfully.

Professional help

There are services available to help you and your teenager to work through difficult issues. Your doctor is a good starting point for information and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321
- ABCD Parenting Young Adolescents Tel. (03) 8660 3500

Things to remember

- Negative communication is a common cause of conflict between a parent and teenagers.
- Appreciate that your teenager has a different view of the world and respect their opinions.
- Establish reasonable house rules in consultation with your teenager.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

NAPCAN

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2012 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.