

TALKING WITH AND LISTENING TO ADOLESCENTS

Communication is the cornerstone of our relationships with our children. Creating a safe, open, and honest channel of communication helps us share information and hear what our youth thinks, needs, or is doing. Finding time is also a factor—youth at this age are spending more time working, hanging out with peers, and on social media, reducing the opportunity for conversations. Because adolescence is a time of developing personal identity, testing boundaries, and increasing independence from family, communicating with an adolescent is different from communicating with a younger child, so you may need to try new strategies.

7 Tips for Parents and Caregivers

1. Keep talking!

- Start talking and keep talking! Begin with easier topics like sports, music, movies, games, social media, school, friends, other family members ... then consider the right place and time to move on to other topics like relationships, sex, or drugs.
- Become familiar with things that are important to your child. It doesn't mean you have to like the same genre of music, but showing an interest in the things they're involved in shows them they're important to you.
- Ask open ended questions that go beyond "yes" or "no" answers.

2. Validate your child's questions.

- Create an atmosphere where youth feel safe and comfortable asking questions. Respond with, "That's a great question" or "I'm so glad you asked that question."
- Thank them for trusting you to listen.
- If you aren't able to answer a question, be honest and follow up later, or research the answer together.

3. It's not just what you say, but how you say it.

- Pay attention to your tone and body language when you speak to your child. Youth don't want to disappoint, and if they sense that you might be upset, they may shut down.
- Set your devices aside when speaking with your child and take time to really listen to what they are saying. Reflect on what you want to say before you respond.

4. Instead of a lecture, engage in problem-solving together.

- Spend less time talking "at" your child and more time talking "with" them.
- Don't just jump in with advice to fix the problem or place blame. This can make youth less likely to open up in the future. You want to make it emotionally safe and easy for them to come to you.

Why does communication matter?

Communication helps adolescents:

- Feel cared for and loved
- Believe they matter and are important to you
- Feel safe and not alone with their worries
- Learn how to say what they feel and need

5. Be a role model.

- Be mindful of your own behaviors and work on your own communication style if you think your child could also benefit. For example, show what it means to be an active listener and use “I statements” to resolve conflicts.
- Be a role model when it comes to your own use of screen media. We often focus on how much time youth are on social media, but when they see the adults around them on their devices, this can prevent young people from opening up. American parents of adolescents spend more than seven hours a day on non-work-related screen media, yet 78% of them believe they are good role models for children when it comes to media use.¹

6. Don't take it personally.

- It's easy to take it personally when your child doesn't want to share, but try not to! It's not about you, but about their stage of development. If you take it personally, you will be more likely to respond with frustration or anger, which will only further close the lines of communication.
- If you react in a way you wish you hadn't, admit you were wrong, apologize, and try again.

7. Make plans for family time.

- Meal times are opportunities for parents to talk with and listen to their children. Adolescents join their families for a meal less often as they grow older, but still benefit when they eat regularly with their parents.² Frequent family meals can lead to higher self-esteem and positive academic outcomes and decreased depression, alcohol and substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and violent behavior.² Use family meals as a regular time to check in with your adolescent and stay involved in their lives.

How can we problem-solve together?

- Discuss the consequences of actions to help adolescents link impulsive thinking with facts. This helps train the brain to make connections between cause and effect.
- Teach youth that they're resilient and competent. Sometimes, adolescents have trouble seeing how they can play a part in changing bad situations. Remind them of times in the past that they helped improve upon a situation.
- Ask if they want you to respond when they come to you with problems, or if they just want you to listen.
- Be ready to hear opinions you may not agree with. Validate what you can; and save debates for later.
- Don't pretend to know all the answers.



Be a Healthy Communicator



Is it verbal abuse?

Negative communications can be verbal abuse when you resort to:

- Name calling
- Frequent criticism
- Blaming
- Violating boundaries
- Yelling
- Threatening to hurt a youth
- Long silences (hours or days)

Sometimes adults are silent because they don't know what to say, they are afraid they will say something that makes matters worse, or they are unable to communicate due to their own issues or problems. And some adults never learned how to be healthy communicators.

Some of techniques can help you become a better (and healthier) communicator:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Wait 5 minutes before talking to your child if you are angry or need a moment to adjust.
- Try to find words to label your feelings.
- Say it to yourself or write it down first (practice).
- Share your feelings with another adult.
- Focus on the present—don't look to the past or the future just yet.

Resources

[Center for Parent & Teen Communication](#)

[American Sexual Health Association, "Be an Askable Parent"](#)

[Healthy Children, "How to Communicate with and Listen to Your Teen"](#)

References

¹ Lauricella, A. R., Cingel, D. P., Beaudoin-Ryan, L., Robb, M. B., Saphir, M., & Wartella, E. A. (2016). The Common Sense census: Plugged-in parents of tweens and teens. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

² Harrison, M. E., Norris, M. L., Obeid, N., Fu, M., Weinstangel, H., & Sampson, M. (2015). Systematic review of the effects of family meal frequency on psychosocial outcomes in youth. *Canadian Family Physician*, 61(2), e96-e106.