

Communicating with Teenagers - what's the go?

This 6-part 'Teenager Series' has been designed to give an insight into the workings of the teenage brain and some tips to help to navigate parenting your teenager. These learnings are based on our research and years of experience supporting fathers and father-figures. But the fact is, everyone's situation is different, so feel free to be creative, and adapt our wisdom to suit your circumstances.

Teenager Series Part 2: Communicating with your teenager.

In this article:

- Talking with your teenager
- Listening with an open mind
- Conversation with your teenager
- Tough topics
- Family conflicts and issues

As children move closer to adolescence they may appear to not want to talk as much with their parents. This does not mean they don't want to talk to their parents. Nor does it mean they have nothing to say. It is important at this time for parents to not give up and keep asking questions and talking on a regular basis. This helps children to feel supported during these changing times. Children who feel their parents are always available when they need them, usually feel close to and like being a member of the family. This feeling of closeness between family members helps to protect children from many problems.

The more you can open up your lines of communication early on, the more you will establish mutual trust and respect you need to have good conversations and know what they are thinking and feeling. This will also encourage them to come to you with any problems, plus help you when having difficult conversations or resolving disagreements.

Staying close isn't easy, though. Teenagers are can be difficult to communicate with at this age, especially, if with their need for independence they see you as interfering in any way. While they seem to have no trouble talking to their friends, when you ask them 'how their day went' they may suddenly become mute..



This phase will pass, and your job as a father is still vitally important. As your child grows up, the way you communicate will need to change to reflect the changes in your relationship as they head towards adulthood. Here are some tips for navigating this new phase:

Tips for shifting your attitude to talk with a teenager

- Young people may have viewpoints that may be different from yours or may do things you don't understand. Try to see they are learning to be their own person, and this is a positive and necessary step in their development.
- 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. Mistakes can be a valuable lesson in life.
- You will always feel responsible for your child's wellbeing and safety, no matter how old they are. It will be difficult to let them take risks. Allow them to take safe risks and support their efforts.
- You need to show your teenager that even though you may disagree sometimes this should not affect your relationship– show them your unconditional love. While guiding them. I love you, but I don't agree with what you are doing.
- Decisions can now be made together. Try to discuss issues to reach an outcome that you and your teenager can both accept. "Okay, you can go to the party, but you need to be home at a reasonable time. What time do you think we should agree to?"



Listen with an open-mind

Communication is more than just asking about what your teenager has been doing, it's also asking about what they've been thinking and are feeling. The common complaint from teenagers is that their parents don't listen to them.

Teenagers want to be heard, understood and accepted. For this to be achieved, parents especially, must listen with an open mind recognising the feelings behind what their teenagers are saying, as well as what they are not saying.

Remember, emotions often run high during adolescence due to all the restructuring going on in the brain and hormones interacting in this process. So, while there is more activity in the emotional sections of the brain (the limbic system) there is also disruption in the planning and impulse control parts of the brain (the frontal lobes and the prefrontal cortex). This means your teenager may be overly sensitive emotionally if there are differences of opinions, problems with friends or disagreements at home. "Warning – wide mood swings can occur without warning"

Tips for dealing with emotional outbursts

- Let your teenager know you will listen and try to understand their point of view, without putting them down or trying to control them.
- When disagreements arise, listening does not mean you give up your authority as a parent. It does mean giving your teenager a voice in matters that concern them. Even when agreement cannot be reached, teenagers are more likely to do what their parents wish if they feel that their parents listened to them with an open mind.
- Choose your battles wisely. Sometimes the teenage emotional brain can overtake their rational brain, and this can result in outbursts or meltdowns that appear to be a complete overreaction to the situation. Be aware of which issues are not worth the drama and let these things go. Wait for a calmer moment to bring up those issues you need to follow up on.
- Remember your teenager is struggling with a lot of restructuring in the brain, hormonal influences and developmental changes which can sometimes combine to make everything just seem too difficult.

Conversations with your teenager

Having conversations with your teenager, asking their opinions and listening to their ideas shows that you are seeing and treating them as maturing young people.

"I used to be close with my daughter. She would talk with me about everything. Now she's 15 and avoids me. She is quiet at dinner and then goes to her room and talks with friends on the phone all evening. Sometimes she gets moody and angry. I want to reach her the way I used to, but I don't know how to start."

Michael. Parent of Shana 15

A great time for talking with teenagers is to talk side-by-side. This can be when you are driving to school or sport, walking together, in the kitchen cooking or doing the dishes. During these times you and your teenager know that you have that time together and while you are mostly looking at what you are doing at not directly at each other, this creates a casual opportunity to chat.

These times are particularly good for having tricky conversations. When you are engaged in a side-by-side conversation it takes the pressure off your child (and you) because you are not facing each other and making direct eye, which can put pressure on them to open up about something that is difficult to discuss. Especially as they get older, kids tend to feel more relaxed and open up more when they are doing other things side-by-side.

So, if you want your child to open up more or is you need to engage in a tricky conversation, use the time in the car on the way to school or sport or go for a walk side-by-side.

Conversation starters – with secondary school children.

Try the following:

- Ask "how am I doing as your dad (or other appropriate father-figure title)?" and "what could I be doing better?"
- Compare notes on football or other sporting teams
- Ask them to explain something they are interested in (a computer game, say, or a genre of music)

Dinner time is a good time to practice your family communication skills .

"Dinner is very important in our family. We will even make dinner later if necessary, so that we can all eat together. We have never had TV, although we did borrow one for the Olympics, but then we gave it back when they were over. During dinner I usually start with one child and ask that person to tell us all about their day. That way they all get to have a go at being focused on either once in three days or more often. Of course, if they don't want to talk about that day, we let them pass." – Geoff Creelman, consulting manager in computing.

Open-ended questions

A good way to encourage your children to talk with you is to use open-ended questions. These questions encourage children to talk because they ask for more than just a "yes" or "no" answer.

Another good way to show interest and ask questions is to use the phase:

Tell me about...

- Instead of "Was the party fun?" Use instead - "Tell me about the party"
- Instead of "How was school?" Use instead – "Tell me about your day at school today"

Open ended questions

Tell me about what you're doing?
Why do you think...?
How do you know...?
Why do you think this happened?
What will happen next?
How did this happen?
What can you do about it?
What do you think would work?
How do you think it could work?
Can you do it another way?
Is there another way to....?

How are these the same?
How are these different?
What do you think comes next?
What else can you do?
What does it remind you of?
I wonder why...
Why did you...?
How did you do that?
Show me how you...?
Tell me about...
Why do you say that....?

Some teenagers have a hard time expressing anger and upset feelings. They keep their feelings bottled inside. Parents need to draw such children out. Try to start by saying "I can see you've been upset. Let's talk about what's happening."

Summary of tips for talking with your teenagers.

- Be available
- Always show your teenagers that you enjoy talking with them
- Try to talk in casual situations

- Encourage general conversation
- Ask your teenagers their opinion on events, interesting subjects and general daily issues so they feel their opinion is valued.
- Try to talk in casual situations
- Let your teenagers know it is not just when they are in trouble or having problems you want to know what is going on in their lives.
- Teenagers usually talk more in casual situations such as driving in the car or doing something outside. Arrange opportunities to share time with your teenagers when you can talk while doing an enjoyable activity together.
- Teenagers will often talk more freely when you sit or walk shoulder to shoulder, rather than standing facing each other.
- Ask questions that need a sentence answer.
- Ask questions that start with 'what' or 'how', rather than ones that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'.

Tough topics

Parents can become frustrated when they try to talk about an issue with their teenager and he or she just won't open up. These are 'tough topics', however, need to be discussed. Ideally, parents should find times and ways to talk with their teenagers before serious problems occur.

Sometimes conversation openers can happen during day-to-day activities. For example, you could discuss social issues like bullying when you see incidents of bullying behaviour in the media, or in a movie. You could discuss bullying and better ways of solving problems, after watching a TV show that shows aggressive behaviour or verbal abuse as a solution to a disagreement.

If your teenager doesn't want to talk, try to be clear that your purpose is to try to build understanding and to support them. If you can't nudge your teenager into talking, back off for a while and give your son or daughter some time to think it over. A few days later, you can try again to start the discussion. You can be flexible in getting the chat going, but should not give up on the need for this discussion. Be patient with them as they will open up more easily if not pressured.

Top Tips for talking about difficult topics – their topic

- If your teenager has something important to talk to you about try unless impossible make yourself available.
- Suggest you go for a walk or sit side-by-side and chat. This is a more relaxed way to have a conversation and enables your teenager to feel more comfortable talking with you about difficult topics because you are not face-to-face. Travelling in the car is a good place for a chat.
- Acknowledge any discomfort "*I can see this is a bit uncomfortable for you to talk about*" and then highlight that you are there to listen and support them.
- Be calm and listen without interrupting. Especially with teenagers, you don't have to always solve their problems, but they often need a sounding board to work out how they will deal with the problem themselves.
- When your teenager is telling you about the issues listen and then rephrase to show you are really listening – "*Okay so what you are saying is...*" "*Yes, I can see that you are feeling (pretty upset, annoyed) about that*"; *I can see that is a problem that is ... (tricky, difficult, upsetting).*



- When they have finished telling you by praise your child for opening up to you. *"I am proud of you" "I know that was really hard for you"*
- Offer support by asking – *"What can I do to help?"*, *"Can I suggest something?"* or *"Would you like me to do something to help you?"*
- Ask your teenagers' permission before giving them advice. Sometimes as parents we offer our teenagers advice without seeing if they want it or are ready for it. Statements like *"Would you like me to tell you about some things I have tried that seemed to work?"* make teenagers feel like they have some control, especially in difficult situations.
- Have an open and honest discussion and come up with some actions going forward.
- Always let your teenager know that you will check in with them to see how they are feeling and how things are going. Let them know that they can come to you and talk some more at any time.

Top Tips for talking about difficult topics – your topic

- Try to go for a walk or sit side-by-side and chat or have the chat when you are travelling side-by-side in the car.
- Calmly let them know what you want to talk to them about. Keep your emotions in check.
- Acknowledge any discomfort *"I know this may be a difficult topic to talk about, but there is nothing that we can't talk about together"* and then highlight why you're talking about it.
- If you are going to talk about something he/she has done wrong, begin by reassuring him/her that you love and care about them him/her, but need to talk about their behavior, or their actions that you have a problem with.
- Begin by asking a question rather than lecturing so they can reflect on the situation. For example – *"I want to talk about the argument we had last night about your phone and see if how you feel about why this is happening. Or "I want us to talk about the way you have been treating your sister, what can you tell me about this?"*
- By doing this you are allowing for discussion of agreements and rules about how everyone behaves in your family. It also allows them the opportunity to

express any problems they may be having that you are not aware of.

- The discussion should then move to focus on solutions. The more teenagers are engaged in finding these solutions the more likely they are to follow through with them. Ask *"What do you think you can do to make this situation better?"*
- Once you have agreed upon the action, say *"Okay good, well let's see how that goes and we can check back in and have another chat to see if things are improving"*.
- If you need to remind them of boundaries and rules do this is a firm but warm way, to reinforce that the family values of what is acceptable and not acceptable behaviour for your family.

When your teenager is upset or crying– how to manage the situation?

- **Use your voice and actions well.** Teenagers usually model their parent behaviours.

If you

- Talk calmly;
- Use caring words; and
- Listen with all your attention, they will too.
- A calm voice and relaxed tone can help settle the situation.

- **'Cooling off' time**

When you or your teenagers are feeling very angry or upset, consider using a 'cooling off' time before you try to talk.

