

COMMUNICATION

For effective, open parent-adolescent relationships



Effective and open communication is at the heart of healthy parent-adolescent relationships. Research shows that adolescents who can openly communicate with their parents (or caregivers) on a regular basis—and feel like they are being heard—are less likely to engage in a wide range of risky behaviors or to experience dating violence. In fact, these benefits extend to college-bound adolescents who are no longer at home and subject to parental monitoring.

While talking with adolescents can be difficult, research shows that as children enter early adolescence, they are less likely to disclose aspects about their life to their parents. Here are some suggestions for how to communicate effectively with your adolescent:

PROVIDE WARMTH AND SUPPORT.

Warmth, encouragement, and responsiveness are key elements of effective parent-adolescent communication.^{7,8} Adolescents are better able to have difficult conversations with their parents when they trust that their parents will love them no matter what. This confidence is built up with parents who demonstrate kindness and support daily.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK

Pay attention to when and where your adolescent feels comfortable talking, and try to create more opportunities to connect with them. Shared activities—practicing a sport, cooking, driving to the mall, watching a TV show—can be great opportunities for conversations. Talk with them about things they're interested in, like media (movies, music, video games), school, friends, family happenings, current events, your past, and the future.



LISTEN TO YOUR ADOLESCENT

Be attentive, don't interrupt, and ask follow-up questions. Sometimes the less you talk, the more your adolescent will ask what you think. When you do respond to your adolescent, share with them instead of lecturing. Tell them about situations and challenges you faced when you were their age, and how you felt at the time.

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.

When talking with adolescents about decision-making, don't jump to tell them what to do. Instead, ask questions that invite them to think through the possibilities. If your child is considering quitting their after-school job to join a sports team, for example, ask them how such a decision might affect them positively and negatively. This teaches adolescents to weigh costs and benefits before deciding, a vital skill in adulthood..

DON'T OVERREACT

If your teen has opinions you disagree with or displays behavior that you find upsetting. Share your concerns firmly but calmly. If you can stay calm, your adolescent will feel more comfortable sharing information with you. And if your child feels judged by you or sees that you are visibly upset, they may be less likely to open up to you in the future. If you or your adolescent are having trouble staying calm, take a break and return to the conversation after cooling off.

TALK EARLY, OFTEN, AND HONESTLY ABOUT SENSITIVE TOPICS AND RISKY BEHAVIOR

You can be a strong support for your adolescent if you engage them early, often, and openly about sex, substance use, and other sensitive topics. Many parents delay these conversations and allow the teen's peers, the media, and other sources to provide their children with information before they do.⁹ Instead of waiting, have ongoing conversations with your children into adolescence. Use TV shows or movies as starting points for conversations, and consider talking in the car or via text if it's more comfortable.

FOOTNOTES

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