

Talking to Teens

Do:

- Listen, listen, listen... nod & acknowledge or summarize what the teen has said (being careful to put yourself in his/her shoes), rather than giving unwelcome advice
- Choose an informal but private setting (e.g., driving in the car, cooking dinner when nobody else is in the kitchen, going for a coffee together)
- Keep it light...you can learn a lot about your teen from their sense of humor, and sometimes “shooting the breeze” about the weather, the game etc. greases the wheels of communication
- Ask specific questions on topics of interest (e.g., What’s that piece you are practicing for band? When do we need to shop for your Prom dress?) to start a conversation
- A genuine compliment about something positive relaxes many teens, and eases communication
- Ask teens how they feel rather than telling them how they feel, even if it’s obvious (e.g., “How did you feel about that?” rather than “That must have made you angry”)
- Ignore eye-rolling or other dismissive gestures—assume the teen has heard you but thinks you are either being old-fashioned or stating the obvious
- Normalize sensitive topics to indicate that they are OK to discuss (e.g., people at your age may wonder about their sexual orientation; some people experiment with marijuana or other drugs)
- Offer to help, but don’t push it (e.g., “I can talk to your teacher if you like...unless you’d rather handle this yourself”—if the latter, follow up with the teen to ensure the discussion happened)
- Make suggestions tentatively (e.g., “I wonder if this would work” rather than “Do this”), as it respects your teen’s ability to choose what to do
- When you need to set a limit, say why (e.g., “I need you to check in by 10 o’clock, because that’s the latest I can drive you home if you need a ride” rather than “Because I said so”)
- Give choices, but remain in charge (e.g. What would you rather do first: finish your homework, or straighten up? –implication: you will do both eventually)

Don’t:

- Assume that an uncommunicative teen agrees with your views and is fine...conversations between parents and teens are needed to show mutual caring, to get things done, and to keep you informed about his or her emotional and social development
- Pry further if the teen says “I don’t want to talk about it”; instead offer to be available if he/she has a change of heart
- Burden the teen with your own history, unless you can think of an experience that is clearly similar to your teen’s, and might help them feel understood
- Ask general, open-ended questions like “How was your day?” or “How was school?”
- Agree with your teen just to be chummy...teens can smell a phony a mile away
- Either fall apart or explode when your teen broaches certain topics, as the teen will then not discuss them; remain calm and listen, then formulate a response
- Criticize: it shuts down communication, so avoid it unless absolutely necessary
- Speak on your adolescent’s behalf: they have their own ideas
- Put down your teen’s peers or refer to them as “kids” (“people” is usually better)
- Minimize the teen’s concerns, or respond with sarcasm