

HOW TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR TEEN

By

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Manny parents struggle with conversing with their adolescent. Attempts at communication often result in yelling, slamming doors, feelings of resentment, and a sense of hopelessness that issues can be resolved. Below are nine strategies to enhance communication with your teen.

1. Praise Positive Behavior

Usually when a parent approaches their teen it is to complain or scold them. In a short time the teen learns that when their parent wants to speak with them it likely means they are in trouble. Effective communication is not about to ensue under these conditions. Parents must be as diligent in noting positive behaviors in their teen as they are reporting undesirable acts.

2. Listen and Don't Monopolize the Conversation

All too often parents' discussions with their teens becomes long-winded lectures. A one-way conversation does not promote communication and, again, teaches the child that speaking with their parents is unpleasant. Parents should allow their teen to speak, at least as much as the parent does, and encourage the teen to talk by using open-ended questions, such as, "What do you think about ...?"

3. Limit Preaching and Attempting to Persuade

Since parents are older and (hopefully) wiser they tend to preach to their kids. This is understandable, as no parent wants their child to fail, but most teens view their parents as old and out of touch so the "sermons" are not well received. I frequently have to remind parents to think about their own adolescence and how willing they were to accept their parents' advice. Similarly, attempting to argue with or persuade a teen is wasteful and painful. Having raised two sons and having been in clinical practice nearly 40 years, I have yet to hear of a situation where a parent preached to or argued a point with their teen and the teen responded with, "Mom/Dad thanks for bringing that up. I'll do exactly as you said." Parents have the right—and the duty—to briefly make their position known, but (in most cases) the teen should be allowed to make their choice. Teens learn best when the "world" applies a consequence to their actions, not because Mom or Dad said so. We tend to learn more from our failures than our successes.

4. Don't Match Your Teen's Emotion

Adolescents are naturally labile. Don't let your teen control the mood of the home. In some homes you can only be as happy as the saddest teen in the house. Just because your teen is "losing it," does not mean you have to "lose it," too. Remember, "Misery loves company." Make your point—briefly—and walk away.

5. Avoid Judging and Dismissing Feelings

Nobody appreciates it when someone judges them or dismisses their feelings. Parents must realize that teens are in the awkward stage of struggling to find their personal identity at the same time they want to be accepted by their peer (not parental) group. Telling your teen they are forbidden to associate with a peer because you view that peer as an outcast, how they dress makes them look like an idiot, or that intense emotion they have about somebody they are dating is “just puppy love,” will not facilitate communication with your adolescent. If you believe you need to comment, preface your brief statement with something like, “It seems to me.....”

6. Speak Concretely

Recently I had a case in which a father and a teen had a blowout over “washing the truck.” The adolescent son obediently washed and waxed the exterior of the truck but the father was upset because the son had not cleaned the interior of the vehicle. When giving directions, making requests, reinforcing, or even scolding your teen, parents must be clear, concise, and specific. The critical questions are: “What does it look like? What would I see?” If the father in the above case had defined clearly what he meant by “washing the truck,” a major incident could have been avoided.

7. Use “We’ll Get Back to You”

Teens typically want what they want when they want it. Often your teen will pressure you for an immediate answer to something that can wait. Consider responding with, “I’ll speak with Mom/Dad and we’ll get back to you after dinner. Don’t let your teen “divide and conquer.” Also, be careful of implying that you are okay with the issue before you consult with your partner, because if the answer ultimately becomes “no,” you have inadvertently painted your partner as the “bad guy.”

8. Actively Listen

True listening—active or responsive listening—means more than just being quiet, not interrupting, and not monopolizing. Active listening involves maintaining eye contact, smiling and nodding appropriately, and asking for more information, such as, “Tell me more about that.”

9. Use Paraphrasing

The pinnacle of communication is paraphrasing. Paraphrasing involves actively listening, as described above, but once the parent has heard what the teen has to say on a topic, the parent first summarizes the teen’s major points to complete the communication. The next time you are having a conversation with your teen about whether they should be allowed to do something or go somewhere, consider the following: Ask your teen to review all their points; listen actively and responsively; and ask if the teen is done. When the teen acknowledges they have made every point they can think of, then you, as the parent, can summarize all the points and ask for confirmation. When the teen confirms you have accurately reviewed all of the issues, then you, the parent, can provide a response, positive or negative, and the discussion is closed. This procedure does not

guarantee you teen will be pleased if your response is in the negative, but it does ensure that your teen will not be able to say you never listened to them.

By using these nine methods parents, over time, parents should be able to communicate more effectively with their adolescent. (Several of these techniques may also work well with one's spouse, as well.)

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