

How to Talk With Your Teenager, Not At Them

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“Why can’t they be like we were?” Parents of teens ask themselves this and other preposterous questions as they navigate the treacherous waters of parenthood. Truth is, all healthy teens are somewhat temperamental, secretive and obstinate — it’s their job!

What Happened to That Sweet, Compliant Kid I Knew?

Developmentally, our teenagers are facing huge changes physically, mentally and emotionally. In order to grow up they must begin to separate from us. And although it may not seem so, this process is at least as painful for them as it is for us. As adolescents mature, they experience:

- an increased need for autonomy
- a desire for more privacy
- a greater investment in their peers
- a need to try on different identities
- huge physiological changes

And while all of this is occurring with them, we are experiencing our own developmental crisis. Let’s face it — we’re getting older and losing a bit of our sense of personal prowess and control. In other words, we fear we’re over the hill. So when these young upstarts challenge our authority, we feel we must make a last ditch effort to get control of the situation.

Naturally, this backfires. With emotions running high and everyone in developmental flux, how do we talk with these seemingly unapproachable aliens — the kids we used to know and love? And harder yet, how do we get them to respond?

Life will be much easier if you accept that even under the best of circumstances, communication with your teenager will be limited. It’s part of what needs to happen so that he or she can eventually leave home. And despite her need for distance from you, there are ways to encourage quality (if not quantity) interaction with your teen.

Communication Dos

- **Be a good listener.** If your teen is willing to share something — anything — accept it for the precious and rare moment it is. Unless the house is on fire, stop and listen nonjudgmentally. Rule of thumb: Listen twice as much as you speak.
- **Respect her privacy.** If she sees that you understand her need for private phone calls and a closed bedroom door, she may be more willing to try sharing some of her inner world with you.
- **Give her increasing autonomy.** If she believes that you trust her judgment, and understand her need for growing independence, she is more likely to talk with you when real issues arise.
- **Accept all of her feelings,** as long as they are respectfully conveyed.
- **Apologize when you are wrong.**

- When you speak to her, keep your comments brief. Schedule time to talk about unappealing topics, such as homework — don't catch her on the fly. Focus on what she got right, before offering constructive criticism.

Communication Don'ts

- **Avoid lecturing, nagging and guilt trips.**
- **Don't reveal to others the confidences she has shared with you.** She may not risk offering you her intimate thoughts again for some time to come.
- **Refrain from asking questions.** For example, instead of saying "Why are you 15 minutes late getting home," say "I noticed you missed your curfew by 15 minutes." A subtle difference, but one that will meet less resistance.

Unfortunately, there is no navigational chart for making it through the rough waters of adolescence. Following these compass points, however, may make the trip just a bit more navigable.