

Improving communication with your teenagers

May 2016 Newsletter



Trying to communicate with teens can be frustrating. At a time when parents think teens need guidance the most, their kids may be least open to it.

Why can teens be so hard to reach?

The teen years are full of change — social, physical and emotional. Peers increase in importance as teens try hard to fit in. At the same time, parents' influence may seem to shrink.

It's normal for teens to try to establish their own identities and stand on their own two feet. They want more independence. They want to be in charge of themselves.

Yet they know on some level that they still need their parents' love and support. This contradiction can make for some tough times and situations for both kids and adults.

How can parents help?

Concerned parents may try to push their teens to open up to them. They may want to give help before kids ask for it.

The fact is parents usually have to wait for teens to approach them. Then — when there's an opportunity to talk — parents need to avoid destructive communication blocks.

What's a communication block?

It's a remark or attitude on the part of the parent that shames, embarrasses or hurts the teen's feelings. Communication blocks end any discussion abruptly because they make teens feel it's not safe to share.

Types of communication blocks include:

- **Advising** — imposing solutions instead of helping teens explore options
- **Commanding** — telling teens what they should do

- **Interrogating** — asking too many questions instead of listening
- **Trivializing** — making teens' problems seem petty
- **Being a know-it-all** — showing how a problem can be easily solved so as to elevate parents and degrade teens

Help your teen feel safe talking to you

- **Give your full attention when your teen wants to talk.** Put down your phone, turn off the TV and avoid other distractions.
- **Don't judge feelings.** Feelings aren't right or wrong — they just are. If your teen seems upset, you might say something like: "You seem scared/worried/angry," "How can I help?" or "I'm here for you."
- **If your teen is struggling with a problem, say you're available to help look at ways to handle it.** Be a resource.
- **Help teens talk about, consider and make their own decisions unless there's serious risk at hand.** When drugs, alcohol or other dangers are involved, you, as the adult, must act.
- **Follow up.** Find out how things are going. Give praise where it's due.

Parents can find support

You can find parent support groups through community and mental health agencies. Or go online to www.nationalparenthelpline.org for more information on parenting. You can also seek advice from social workers and other professionals in your area.

It may not always seem like it, but you play a crucial role in your children's lives at every stage. Teens need your love, support and respect to grow into happy, capable adults.