



Communicating with your Adolescent: Tips and Tricks





Listen with Curiosity Before Responding

Most of us are conditioned to go straight to asking direct questions, giving advice, or voicing our opinion to our adolescent. This is often met with little to no reciprocation, and we might even notice that our teen's simply shut down and won't talk with us. Our intentions are always loving, yet we may be able to elicit more information from our teens if we engage them with curiosity about what's going on in their lives. Sometimes, sitting back and listening can be more effective than asking direct questions. Adolescents tend to be more open with their parents if they don't feel pressured to share information. Even an offhand comment about something that happened during their day is a way of reaching out and you are more likely to hear more if you stay open and interested, but not prying.

Adolescents often have the experience of being told what to do or being listened to but having their opinions and ideas discounted because they're young. This can be an extremely frustrating experience and adds to avoidance of deeper conversations with adults or authority figures, especially parents. To help your adolescent understand that you value what they have to say, try asking a question such as "Do you want me to listen, or do you want my opinion/advice?" This provides them a sense of choice in how the conversation will go, as well as validate their ability to be the one leading the conversation. Adolescents have much to say but hold back because they fear rejection of opinions/ideas or feel the adult will be the one controlling the conversation.

Provide Opportunities for Your Adolescent to Share Experiences and Ideas

When doing things together like watching a movie, eating a meal, etc., take the time to ask your adolescent about their experience, "What did you think of so and so playing such as such character in the movie?", rather than "Did you finish your homework?" Checking in with your teen by asking a question based on their ideas shows that you value their opinion, rather than only checking in for progress or achievement-based conversation.

Validate Your Adolescents Feelings

As parents, we often tend to problem solve when our children are hurting or expressing other big emotions. We may inadvertently downplay their disappointments. An example might be saying something like “They weren’t right for you anyway” after a romantic disappointment can feel dismissive, even if it’s true! Instead show your adolescent that you understand and empathize by validating with “Wow, that sounds really painful/difficult/upsetting.”

Show Trust

Adolescents want to be taken seriously, especially by their parents. Look for opportunities to show that you trust your teen like asking them for a favor that shows you rely on them. Volunteer a privilege communicates you think they can handle it. When adolescents feel trusted, it boosts their confidence and makes them more likely to rise to the occasion.

Do Things Together

Expressing interest in and finding opportunities to engage in things that your adolescent enjoys is a great way to communicate with them. It’s great if you can find something you both enjoy like hiking or cooking or watching movies without talking about anything too personal. If you can’t find something you both enjoy, watch a show they like or participate in an activity they enjoy. Ask them to teach you about something and treat them like an expert in whatever they want to share with you. These small acts communicate to your adolescent that they can be near you and share positive experiences without worrying that you will ask intrusive questions.

Be Honest and Know When to Find Support

Let your adolescent know that you desire healthy communication with them and that you'll be there whenever they're ready, even if it's not right now. If you have safety concerns about your teen, be honest with them about this as well. Often, young people are discouraged from talking about self-harm, suicide, and other safety issues because adults aren't sure how to handle these types of conversations. Showing concern and providing a space for your child to be honest with you in return is the most important thing. If you have safety concerns for your child, and they aren't willing to be open with you about them, find the appropriate resource(s) or other sources of support. These can include a therapist, a support group, or a resource center.

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