

Communicating With Your Teen

I'll bet several of you are saying "Communicating? Who *communicates* anymore? We argue, I get ignored, but communicate? It doesn't happen!"

Parents often feel frustrated when their children become adolescents. All of a sudden you find you can't say the right thing anymore. You're charged with nagging, being intrusive, negative or worse. "What did I say?" parents are apt to wonder, head spinning as their teen stalks out of the room because of some imagined offense. But being able to talk with your teens - *really* talk so they'll be able to listen - is critical. More than at any other time in a child's life, parents need to be able to communicate not only their love and respect for their child, but also their ideas, values and concerns. At the very time that parents lament the feeling that they're "talking to the wall," research points out that when teenagers feel good about the way they communicate with their parents they're less likely to smoke, drink, use drugs and have early, unprotected sex. In fact, one of the most important reasons teens choose *not* to use alcohol and drugs is because they don't want to jeopardize their relationship with their parents!

OK, so it's important to continue to communicate in a positive, open way, even with an emotionally prickly teen. So how do you do it? Here are some tips that can help smooth the rough waters in conversations between parents and teens:

- Give teens your undivided attention. That means stop cooking, working on the crossword puzzle, or watching the news out of the corner of your eye. Listen.
- Show teens you respect them and their point of view. That means no talking down to them, no preaching, and no belittling remarks.
- Check out your understanding of your teen's point of view. Many times parents *think* they know what their teen is saying when they've actually misinterpreted their child's main message. Check things out by restating in your own words what you think you heard and ask, "Did I get it right? Is that what you meant?"
- Avoid one-sided conversations that sound like you're conducting the Spanish inquisition. Nothing turns teens off faster than feeling like they're being grilled for the minute details of their daily lives.
- Don't let teens turn the tables on you when you ask them to do something or confront them with their behavior. How many times does your teen get on the offensive and complain of *your* nagging or foul mood in response to a simple request to take out the garbage? Keep your eye on the ball - the issue is not your bad mood, it's a request for your teen to do his or her chores.
- Pick and choose your battles. Sometimes it seems like everything turns into an endless tug of war between parents and teens. Hours can be spent on the same old arguments - a messy room, wearing sloppy clothes, loud music...the list goes on. If you're not careful, negative interactions will far outweigh the positive ones. Keep your sights on what's *really* important to wage a battle over - things like substance use, for example.

For more information and resources on adolescent health issues visit the American Medical Association Adolescent Health Web site at www.ama-assn.org/go/adolescenthealth.

This information was adapted from materials that originally appeared on the Tips on Teens Web site authored by Susan Panzarine, PhD and Elaine Rubenstein, PhD, LCSW-C. Dr. Panzarine is the author of *A Parent's Guide to the Teen Years: Raising Your 11- to 14-year-old in the Age of Chat Rooms and Navel Rings*, published in 2000 by Checkmark Books. Dr. Rubenstein maintains an active private practice, working with teenagers and their families.

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