

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Communicating with Adolescents

REMEMBER:

Use humour.

Be available and stay connected.

Take an active interest in your adolescent's life.

Focus on the positive.

Listen to what your teenager is really saying.

Validate feelings.

Use open questions to encourage conversation.

Think before you say no, and provide reasons for your decisions

Provide opportunities for growth.

Parents can find it challenging communicating with adolescents and involving them in family life.

It helps to understand the key aspects of development during adolescence. You can learn about adolescent development in more detail elsewhere on the site, but here are 3 points to remember:

Independence

Adolescence is about developing and asserting independence. Your son or daughter is getting closer to young adulthood, a time when they are expected to be increasingly independent and responsible for their own actions and decisions.

Adolescents are often very interested in the rights that come with being independent, but can forget or feel less motivated by some of the responsibilities that come with increased freedom.

They can swing between striving fiercely for independence and seeking the security of the family home, or wanting approval for their choices. Parents' role in this stage is about guiding and influencing young people to make informed decisions.

Identity

During adolescence, young people are beginning to establish their identity, or where they fit within their family, their peer group and the wider community. Sometimes the way they do this is to separate themselves out from their family, which can look like rebellion and pushing against parents' expectations and values.

This can feel uncomfortable and even hurtful for parents, when it seems like an adolescent is rejecting them. However this is a necessary part of adolescent development. It is a part of learning and growing towards being (hopefully) balanced, resilient, happy and independent adults.

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Last updated July 2011

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Belonging

Friends and peers become much more important during adolescence, often more so than the family relationships and supports that have been a big part of children's lives in younger years. Adolescents may be driven by a need to fit in, to be part of youth cultures that appeal to them, and to differentiate themselves from their parents.

Each of these issues can have major implications for communication between parents and adolescents, and are often a source of frustration and even conflict in families. Understanding these developmental tasks can make it easier to apply the following strategies for communication.

10 TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH ADOLESCENTS

Be Available

It's easy to get caught up with work issues and managing the home, forgetting to spend time with your adolescent children. Sometimes you have to create opportunities to connect, through activities like eating together, talking in the car, going out for hot chocolates,

Family rituals can help with this. You might like to have a movie night once every couple of weeks, where the family gets together for a meal and a chat followed by a movie or DVD that everyone enjoys.

Be Interested

Chat to your teenager about their interests. Find out what gets them excited and engaged, even if they don't have a lot to say about it. Use active listening skills to explore these interests but don't bombard them with questions.

Become involved in some of their activities, for example, cheer them on at sport, watch their favourite TV shows with them now and then, or try sharing something about your interests just as you would with an adult friend.

Keep in mind that adolescents may not want you involved in the same ways you were when they were younger. Be creative about how you stay engaged with them.

Use Humour

Having a laugh with someone is a great way connect with someone and strengthen relationships. Adolescents usually have a great sense of humour (even if it's different to yours). If you can share good times and funny things, it tends to make sharing difficult issues more comfortable.

Emphasise the Positive

It's easy to fall into the trap of only noticing when things go wrong, or when you have to lay down the rules. Try to bring positives into your communication when you can, and provide your adolescent with opportunities to 'get it right'.

Almost everyone responds well to having their strengths noticed and emphasised. Pay attention when your teenager does something that deserves praise. Notice the little things, the random acts of kindness and consideration and comment on those, as well as their achievements and talents.

Help them identify tasks that will demonstrate they are trustworthy, such as small jobs around the house, coming home on time, and sticking to agreements. As well as talking about positives, offer lots of opportunities to show off their skills, independence, maturity, and decision-making.

Listen

Try to really hear what your teenager is saying – this means not interrupting or forcing your own point of view. Adolescents need to develop their own perspectives and values, and (like adults) generally don't respond well to other's opinions being forced upon them.

Give them your full attention – this means stop reading the paper or watching TV. Look them in the eye, and ask questions to clarify meaning.

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Empathising (understanding the other person's perspective and feelings) is one of the best ways to take the heat out of arguments and conflict.

Acknowledge Feelings

It is tempting to brush aside negative emotion in an attempt to make things better for our child. However, adolescents who don't learn about managing emotions can find it difficult to know what they are feeling, and how to deal with it. This can have consequences for emotional health and relationships in adulthood.

Help your teenager to become aware of their emotions, especially if they are confused about all they are feeling.

Convey acceptance of the emotion – it okay to feel sad, scared, or angry – what's important is to be able to describe the feeling, and learn what behaviour is acceptable when they feel that way. Acknowledging how your teenager feels will also help them to feel heard.

Use Open Questions

Asking questions is a way of showing your interest, but sometimes it can seem like an interrogation.

Open questions may help to create discussion as they avoid yes or no responses. These questions usually begin with 'how', 'what' and 'why', for example "What did you enjoy about.....?"

Try and weave questions into the normal flow of conversation. Listen; give time to answer, and use the information to direct the conversation. Be patient, and let them come back to you later if necessary: adolescents won't always want to talk when you do.

Encourage Learning

The most helpful responses are ones that show interest and open the way for talking. People learn more if they're allowed to experience the consequences of their behaviour.

Lecturing is simply a signal for many teenagers to tune out. This not only stops communication, it also discourages adolescents from finding their own ways to deal with problems.

Choose Your Response

Adolescents sometimes make dramatic statements ("I hate you!" or "You've ruined my life!") for effect, just as adults do. Over-reacting to these situations can short-circuit the chance of a reasonable conversation.

Find out what they are trying to say. Watch out for hidden messages like "the teacher picks on me". Offer your perspective calmly and reasonably, without invalidating theirs. This means being aware of your own feelings and managing them before you respond.

Think Before You Say No

When your teenage child asks permission to do something that you're unsure about, it's okay to tell them you have to think about it.

When providing feedback on a decision, try to acknowledge their desires and feelings about the issue. Let them know that you understand it's important to them.

It's part of growing up to question the logic of decisions, and to expect fairness. Even if your teenager doesn't agree with your decision, it'll be easier for them to accept if they understand your reasons and feel that they have been heard.

Providing them with reasons will also help them understand the decision-making process, and model to them how to make their own informed decisions.