

COMMUNICATION

Communicating effectively with adolescents

It has been estimated that teenagers today spend a third of their waking time among their peers and less than a tenth of their time interacting with adults. When you consider all the elements competing for your teenager's time including television, electronic gaming machines, homework and part-time work it is little wonder that parents are lucky to spend even half an hour a day with teenagers.



The best communication in families tends to happen when no one is working at it; however opportunities to talk shouldn't be left to chance. Here are some ideas to promote some communication between you and your teenagers:

- Make all meals television-free and insist that all family members eat together
- Have an electronic screen-free day once a week (except computers used for schoolwork). You will be surprised what a difference it makes.
- Take your teenager out alone and spend some special time together.
- Ask their opinion about a range of topical and news issues
- Look for communication starters. Television, music and shared interest can provide entry into your teenager's world.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Speaking with teenagers can require great attention to detail. Sometimes it seems that you say one word out of place and a teenager can close communication down or fly off into a tantrum. That can seem like normal behaviour with some young

people for quite a period. Communication that came naturally with children suddenly requires parents to choose every word with care, to consider carefully tone of voice and body language. It seems that communicating with teens is like going for a job interview – you need to pay close attention to what you say and how you speak.

Here are some ideas to promote respectful two way communication between parents and young people:

- Respect your teenager's ideas and opinions. There is a difference between disagreeing and disregarding. You may say, "I understand what you are saying, but I disagree with your opinion."
- One way of dealing with teenagers is using a problem-solving approach. That is, you state the rule: "I need you home safely by . . . o'clock." And then follow up saying, "Let's come up with some ways to make this work for you and me." Then generate some ideas and pick a solution and try it. Talk in a week or two to see if it is working.
- Give the speaker plenty of time to finish what they are saying without interrupting. Give your teenager your full attention when they talk.
- Use 'I-sentences' to get you point across. For example, "I feel worried when you don't tell me where you are going."
- Be prepared to negotiate and change your mind if presented with a reasonable argument. On the other hand, avoid being ambushed by a teenage bush lawyer arguing for a better deal just as

you are going off to work. Set some rules and processes in place for negotiating.

CHOOSE BATTLES WISELY

The trick to living cooperatively with teenagers is not to fight with them over the minor events. It is easy to become caught up in battles over relatively inconsequential issues such as bedroom tidiness and appearance, or school uniforms, which are inconsequential in the broader scheme of life. The trouble with sweating over the small stuff is that relationships are damaged with young people over issues of relatively little importance. It also drains energy away so that when there really is a need to hold some ground over an important issue such as a young person coming home at a reasonable time from a party there is just nothing left to fight with.

KEEP IN MIND

Create opportunities to talk with your teenagers. Often they prefer to talk with parents by themselves.

Let them bring a friend to some family events. It is important that young people don't drop out of their family.



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