

# Getting the Conversation Started: Moving Towards Healthier Relationships With Your Teens

By: Tricia Propson for the Times Villager-August, 2010

“I wish my mom wasn’t too busy to talk to me.”

“I wish I could tell my parents the stuff I do without them over-reacting.”

Fox Valley Teens recently made those comments on a traveling graffiti wall designed to get them to open up. Although the postings remain anonymous, the message is consistent and clear. Many teens have a hard time communicating honestly and effectively with their parents.

I live in a rural area with limited cell phone coverage. I often experience dropped calls and fuzzy reception. I may be in the middle of a conversation before I realize that I am speaking into the air or that the person I am speaking with has not heard what I said. It isn’t that I didn’t communicate; it was that the connection was faulty. If that call were important, I would keep trying to reach them until we made a successful connection. That is how we can look at pursuing healthy conversations with our teens.

Getting the conversation started should be one goal of any healthy parent/teen connection. The Kaiser foundation recently reported that 83% of teens do not talk to their parents about important issues like sex and drugs because they are afraid of how they will react. According to Search Institute research, “70 percent of young people say they have family support, but only 30 percent, felt they had positive family communication and only 22% of High School students report healthy communication with their parents.”

Consider some of these ideas to see if they can help you kick start healthy conversations with your teen.

Most teens like conversations to be direct and straight to the point. One way you can find out how well you are communicating with your teen is to ask them. They will probably be very happy to tell you! They may even give you a list of the things they think you should do differently. That is a good thing. Listening to your teen and not reacting before you understand what they are really trying to say will give you insight into the health of your relationship.

Body Language can be a big factor in conversations. Many teens say things like, “My parents hate me.” or, “My parents don’t understand me.” They may not be reacting to what you say as much as what you are doing. Check your body language and tone of voice. Are you approachable? Does your verbal communication match your body language? Soften your face and relax your body when you are talking with your teen and see if your conversations are more productive.

We live in an on-the-run society. Resist the temptation to squeeze in a quick, meaningful conversation between activities or errands. Make sure you have time to devote to interact with your teen. Is your son or daughter on their way out for the evening? Are you rushed, stressed, or in a hurry to get somewhere? Do you check your emails while asking how their day was? Choose a good time to talk where you can both engage. Make an appointment if you need to. Setting time aside to focus on your teen will make them feel valued and send the message that they are important to you.

Be consistent. As parents, we lose credibility when we say one thing and do another. Responding to our teens with statements like, “Because I said so,” or “Do as I say but not as I do,” sends mixed messages. If you want your teen to exhibit a certain behavior, model it for them. Only 2% of teens who smoke have parents who don’t smoke, for example. Expecting your teen to attend church when you choose to stay home isn’t going to work. Teens are hypocrite detectives and watch their parent’s actions closely. Check your own behavior to see if the messages you are sending to your teen are consistent with your lifestyle.

Tell the truth and be honest. One of the things teens consistently write on the rekenekt graffiti wall is, “I wish my parents would tell me the truth.” I often hear them say, “I am not a baby-I can handle the truth,” or “My dad is such a liar.” Sometimes we think we are protecting our teens by not leveling with them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Teens today have a keen sense for justice and truth. As they learn how to deal with the confusing world around them, they look to parents for honest, truthful solutions to real-life problems. If we are willing to face the ugly realities in our own lives honestly, our teens will learn to do the same.

Sometimes parents mistake the need to be an authority figure by dominating their teens with control, manipulation, and power plays. Teenagers need to be treated with respect. They live in a world where respect is rare. Don't use sarcasm or critical words to communicate. Teasing is just bullying in disguise so don't allow it into your relationship with your teen. Break out the old fashioned Golden Rule. Talk to them respectfully and expect that they do the same with you and their siblings. Promote an environment of respect in your relationship and see if it makes a difference in your conversations.

Be willing to listen to their point of view. Use open-ended questions that allow them to answer in their own words. Resist the temptation to finish their sentences or assume you know the answer. I often hear parents say things like, "If I only knew the real reason, I wouldn't have come down on him so hard," or, "If she had told me what was going on I could have helped but now look at the mess she is in." Many times we don't give our teens the chance to tell us what is really going on in their lives. Our own past experiences or partial understanding of situations can skew our perspective. We may end up alienating our teens when our goal is to love and relate to them. In an on-going research study of parents and teens in the Fox Valley, we are finding that approximately 80% of students think their parents don't listen while 80% of parents think their kids think they listen.

No matter where your relationship is with your teen right now, getting the Conversation Started can move you towards healthier relationships with your teens

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### Getting the Conversation Started

**Try these simple "Take 5 to Save Lives" tips with your own teen. Set aside at least five uninterrupted minutes to get the conversation started with your teen. Remember that timing is important and if meaningful conversation is to happen, you both need to be on board. Explain to your teen that you want to understand their life situation and realize that there may be things you could be doing better. Show them sincerely that you want to connect with them. If they seem responsive, try these conversation starters:**

- 1) What is the one thing you need to hear from me that you don't?**
- 2) Is there something I say or do that pushes you away?**
- 3) Is there anything you wish you could tell me?**
- 4) Is there anything you wish you could ask me?**
- 5) What can I do to connect with you more often?**

**To download Conversation Starter Coupons and other parent/teen resources, please visit: [www.cornerstonecomm.org](http://www.cornerstonecomm.org) and click on rekenekt/ resources.**