

“Can You Hear Me Now?” Effective Communication Between Parents and Young People

Adolescents are not monsters. They are just people trying to learn how to make it among the adults in the world, who are probably not so sure themselves.¹

Know that you are not the first, nor will you be the last parent to wonder how to best communicate with your teenager. With all of the changes happening internally and externally for your teen (hormonally, cognitively, developmentally, socially, legally, etc.) it's only natural your teen may not act or feel like themselves. And, when you combine natural body changes with society standards—the pressure to look, be, act, and feel a certain way—it makes perfect sense that your teen may appear out of sorts, want to be left alone, or want to sleep all day. Being a teenager can be awkward and hard on practically every level, and adults, let's be honest, most of us wouldn't relive our teen years for anything. Amid all of the developmental changes in the bodies and brains of teenagers, is the quest to become more independent or autonomous, and often a quest for greater meaning and understanding of life. Exploring these quests may appear in the form of experimenting with substances, pushing the limits of curfew at home, taking risks while driving, exploring their sexuality, ramping up their use of language, posting provocatively on Facebook/texts or question the faith they were raised with and how to make it more relevant in their daily lives. And it is precisely during these quests that you know so well from being a teenager yourself, when you worry about their safety, their focus on school, their goals, their faith, and their future.

It is crucial to discuss many topics with your teen like sex, alcohol, money, drugs, dating, boundaries, curfews, and expectations of knowing where they are and who they are with. These are not only necessary and appropriate conversations to have with your teen, no matter how awkward either of you may feel. It is your job (author Christian Smith says the parent, whether they are a negative model or positive model, is nonetheless THE most significant spiritual instructor for their teen) as a parent to have these conversations with them. After all, society, Hollywood, and social media have no problem telling your teen about these topics. So, your teens also need to hear your voice; they need to know the facts of life from you. AND they need the reinforcement of hearing these lessons and thoughts from other trusted adults. They need to know you respect and trust them and they can trust you. They need to know there are consequences when trust is broken and that it takes time to regain it. Teens need to hear you're telling them all these things, not to freakishly control them, but because you love them and want them to know they are valued for so much more than any social standard.

It is also important to spend designated time together amid your busy schedules. Plan meals together or have one night per week when everyone is home instead of away at meetings or friends' houses. When you are spending designated family time together, make a covenant that you will all leave your cell phones in another room during the meal or activity. Parents who have done this admit that they were just as tempted to check work email, as their teens were to respond to texts and Facebook. And, speaking of texts and emails, remember that a text from your teen saying where they are or where they are going, is them communicating with you; just because it wasn't a phone call doesn't mean they aren't respecting your rules. Be mindful of the technology that has always been a part of their lives when choosing your battles about communication.

¹ Virginia Satir, *The New Peoplemaking*.

Now, that said, you may be the last person your teen wants to talk to about various topics, and while painful, that is all part of growing up as well. For instance, your son may talk to his uncle about his new significant other and how his friends drank at a party instead of talking to you. Or your daughter may talk to her coach about her fears of academic probation and not fitting in with other females in her grade. Again, while this may be hurtful to you, this is part of the natural struggle for independence and identity. What's most important is that your teens always have other adults whom they can trust and talk to about their lives if they choose not to talk to you about everything. So, remind your teens of these people—coaches, youth directors, pastors, aunts, uncles, band directors, confirmation mentors, boss at part time job—people they can trust and count on. And know that as a parent, surrounding your teen with others who will love them is one of the greatest gifts you will ever give them. It is helpful (and a to let these other adults know that you have suggested to your teen that they trust you, talk with you, include you in their discernment.

Also know that you are not alone when it comes to support as a parent. While we have included suggested resources below, know that the adults your teen trusts and confide in are the same people who are able to support you as a parent. If you would like resources about a specific topic or scenario, contact the youth director at your church. If you would like a parents of teens support group or parenting class, suggest this to other parents and then, as a group, suggest to the appropriate staff of your church. Your church leaders are there as resources for you and will likely welcome the opportunity to support you as parents. In fact, they will probably feel honored that you are asking them for your assistance in the task of parenting.

Above all, you are not alone. As you pray for your teen, know that others are praying for you. And remember that your Heavenly Parent loves you and your teen even more than either of you can fathom.

Recommended Resources

It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools—friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said 'do the best you can with these, they will have to do'. And mostly, against all odds, they do.²

Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church
Kenda Creasy Dean

Have a New Teenager by Friday
Kevin Leman

How to Talk with Teens About Love, Relationships, & S-E-X: A Guide for Parents
Charles D. Miron Ph.D. and Amy G. Miron M.S.

National Fatherhood Initiative

Parent Further

Parenting Teens

Parents: The Anti-Drug

² Anne Lamotte, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*.

Staying Connected To Your Teenager: How To Keep Them Talking To You And How To Hear What They're Really Saying

Michael Riera

Sticky Faith

Teens and Their Parents in the 21st Century

The Real Truth About Teens and Sex: From Hooking Up to Friends with Benefits—What Teens Are Thinking, Doing, and Talking About, and How to Help Them Make Smart Choices

Sabrina Weill

Writer: Reverend Ashley-Anne Masters

Editor: Gina Yeager-Buckley

Designer: Rebecca Kueber



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission