

How can I keep the lines of communication open with my teenager?

Adolescence is a time of change and challenge for your preteen or teenager. The changes that occur during adolescence are often confusing not only for your son or daughter, but for you as well. Though these years can be difficult, the reward is watching your child become an independent, caring, and responsible adult. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers the following tips to help you face the challenges of your child's adolescence:

1. **Spend *family* time with your adolescent.** Although many preteens and teens may seem more interested in friends, this does not mean they are not interested in family.
2. **Spend time *alone* with your adolescent.** Even if your teen does not want time alone with you, take a moment here and there to remind him that your "door is always open," and you are always there if he needs to talk. Remind him often.
3. **When your adolescent talks**
 - Pay attention.
 - Watch, as well as listen.
 - Try not to interrupt.
 - Ask him to explain things further if you don't understand.
 - If you don't have time to listen when your child wants to talk, set a time that will be good for both of you.
4. **Respect your adolescent's feelings.** It's okay to disagree with your child, but disagree respectfully, not insultingly. Don't dismiss her feelings or opinions as silly or senseless. You may not always be able to help when your child is upset about something, but it is important to say, "I want to understand" or "Help me understand."
5. **When rules are needed, set and enforce them.** Don't be afraid to be unpopular for a day or two. Believe it or not, adolescents see setting limits as a form of caring.
6. **Try not to get upset if your adolescent makes mistakes.** This will help him take responsibility for his own actions. Remember to offer guidance when necessary. Direct the discussion toward solutions. "I get upset when I find clothes all over the floor," is much better than, "You're a slob."
7. **Be willing to negotiate and compromise.** This will teach problem solving in a healthy way. Remember to choose your battles. Some little annoying things that adolescents do may not be worth a big fight — let them go.
8. **Criticize a behavior, not an attitude.** For example, instead of saying, "You're late. That's so irresponsible. And I don't like your attitude," try saying, "I worry about your safety when you're late. I trust you, but when I don't hear from you and don't know where you are, I wonder whether something bad has happened to you. What can we do together to help you get home on time and make sure I know where you are or when you're going to be late?"

9. **Mix criticism with praise.** While your teen needs to know how you feel when she is not doing what you want her to do, she also needs to know that you appreciate the positive things she is doing. For example, "I'm proud that you are able to hold a job and get your homework done. I would like to see you use some of that energy to help do the dishes after meals."
10. **Let your child be the adolescent he wants to be,** not the one you wish he was. Also, try not to pressure your adolescent to be like you were or wish you had been at that age. Give your teen some leeway with regard to clothes, hairstyle, etc. Many teens go through a rebellious period in which they want to express themselves in ways that are different from their parents. However, be aware of the messages and ratings of the music, movies, and video games to which your child is exposed.
11. **Be a parent first,** not a pal. Your adolescent's separation from you as a parent is a normal part of development. Don't take it personally.

Don't be afraid to share with your adolescent that you have made mistakes as a parent. A few parenting mistakes are not crucial. Also, try to share with your teen mistakes you made as an adolescent.

Talk to your pediatrician if you are having trouble with your adolescent. He or she may be able to help you and your child find ways to get along.

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