

# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

## Communicating With Your Teen



**Y**ou probably have a teenager in your house if there is talk about dating, driving, telephone use, curfew, drugs, sex, music, friends....These are common topics, which arise when children enter their teenage years. They are a lot easier to manage when parents and teens communicate effectively with each other.

Technically, **effective communication** occurs when the person sending the message makes it clear and easy to understand, and the person on the receiving end understands the message as the sender intended. In the real world, especially in families, this is not always easy to do. Parents often are busy with work demands, running the household, and taking care of responsibilities to family and friends. Teens are involved in the academic and social demands of school, after school and weekend activities, and spending time with friends.

With so much going on, it is no surprise that many of us do not take the steps needed to communicate clearly and to listen carefully. This can lead to problems when talking to teens.

### **Parents and teens can do two things to reduce communication problems:**

Talk more often. The more you talk with each other, the more you have the chance to share important messages. Good times to talk with your teen are before leaving for the office and school, during dinner, and on weekends. Try to plan at least one meal a day as a time when the family sits together and talks. Sometimes it does not matter what you talk about, just that you are talking to each other regularly.

Take extra time to share important messages. When you need to tell your teen something important, such as explaining the responsibilities of caring for a younger sister or brother, take the time to sit

down with your teen and talk face to face. You also can write down the important details for your teen. Ask your teen to share with you what he understands your message to be. Your teen can use this same approach when he needs to share important messages with you.

### **Why is communication so important during the teenage years?**

As teens get older, they will be spending more time away from parents and family. They will need to make decisions on their own. Teens also will be expected by others to take responsibility for their actions. Although teens are gaining more independence from their parents, they are not experienced and need continuing parental guidance. Being sensitive to your teen's level of maturity when offering guidance helps in building greater self-confidence.

*When you communicate sensitively with your teen, you are helping your teen grow up to be a responsible adult.*

**You are helping your teen understand that family rules change as he gets older.**

When Jack turned 16 and received his driver's license, he wanted to use the family car for weekend activities. He and his mother discussed rules for using the car and how car privileges would depend upon Jack's showing responsibility. His mom told him he needed to fill the car with gas before bringing it home, and he needed to have it home at the time he had promised. Setting up these rules in advance helped Jack know what was expected of him when he used the car. Knowing the rules also would help Jack to accept the consequences if he fell short of obeying the rules.

**You are helping your teen to figure out the kind of person she is becoming as she prepares for adult responsibilities.**

Mary and her parents watched a television show about teens and sex. After watching the show, Mary and her parents discussed their views about teen sexuality and responsibility. Mary needed to know her parents' views about teen sexual behavior and to feel comfortable expressing her own views. Should she be faced with a difficult decision about her own sexual behavior, Mary would be more likely to make a good decision. She also is more likely to talk with her parents if there is an open line of communication.

**You are helping your teen have better self-esteem.**

Tim compares himself often to other kids at school. He frequently feels like a failure, since he does not do as well on tests as others and is second string on the basketball team. Tim's father has listened to Tim complain about not being as good as other kids and has expressed understanding of Tim's feelings. This usually helps Tim feel better. Tim's father also has been taking more time with Tim to do activities they both enjoy. Tim's father makes a special effort to make comments about things that Tim does well. Tim's father is helping Tim appreciate his own strengths and abilities.

**You are offering your teen good role modeling in solving problems with other people.**

Erin and her mother were out shopping one day when a salesperson was rude to them as they tried to return some clothes. Erin's mother calmly told the salesperson that she expected to be permitted to return the items and asked if a manager were present who could assist with the return. The salesperson responded in a more helpful fashion. Erin later asked her mother why she did not get angry at the salesperson. Her mother replied: "I was angry, but I have learned that I get better results when I stay calm and think about the best way to get the response I want to get from a person." Erin had the opportunity to both observe and discuss a good way to handle problems with other people.

**You are helping your teen make important life decisions.**

Henry is trying to decide on a college. He wants to pick the best one, but he is not sure how to do this. His parents talk with him about his future goals, about the colleges that have programs that interest Henry, and about colleges that the family can afford. They suggest that Henry call some of the colleges and arrange to visit the ones that are on the top of his list. They talk with Henry about other steps he can take to narrow his choices. His parents help Henry to figure out how to make good decisions, and they permit him to take the steps needed to make a good choice.

.....  
*A lot of good parent-teen communication involves listening.*

The most important thing parents can do to improve communication with their teens is to listen to them. Listening to their teens helps parents to have more influence in their teens' lives. Teens need to feel that they matter and that they can depend on their parents to support and protect them. By listening to teens, parents get across messages of caring and safety.

Listening helps parents stay in touch with their teens' experiences and feelings even though their teens are spending a lot of time away from them. Ultimately, listening begets listening. Most parents would like their teens to listen to them more. By parents listening to their teens, teens are more likely to listen, on their own, to their parents. The next time you sit down with your teen, ask her to tell you about something and quietly hear what she has to say.

Don't be afraid to talk  
about the tough topics.

Involvement in problem behaviors such as sex and drug use can be part of experimentation during the teen years. Even nice kids experiment. Often the first reaction is to shy away from these topics or to give responses that say to your child, "This is something we don't talk about." The problem with avoiding these tough topics is that parents risk not knowing when their children may be getting into trouble. A parent may not realize that a teen's experimenting has gone too far and he has gotten in over his head.

Take teens and sex, for example. Teens are going to have questions about sex, and they are going to have sexual feelings and thoughts. When teens have questions about their thoughts or feelings, parents who give them support and understanding are more likely to have teens who do not act impulsively when faced with a decision about sex. These teens are more informed about what they are feeling and thinking and about the consequences of acting on their thoughts and feelings. When teens understand what may happen if they engage in sexual activity and that their parents are not afraid to talk with them and to help them find answers about sex, these teens are better protected from the pressures of others to engage in sexual behavior.



### You can do several things to make dealing with tough topics easier:

- Check in with your children regularly, know where your children are, and check out concerns you have about your children's behavior. This will make it more likely that you will learn about trouble in the early stages and will have a better chance of helping your teen before things get out of hand.
- Encourage your child to invite friends to your house for the afternoon or for dinner. You can learn a lot about your teen's life by making your home a comfortable place for friends.
- Talk with others who parent their own children in a way you respect.

What to do about  
disagreements  
that won't go away.

Sometimes it's the day-to-day disagreements between parents and teens that can leave parents feeling powerless and wishing they knew what to do. Parents and teens often find themselves bickering about household responsibilities, curfews, friends, and activities. A lot of this bickering occurs because teens and parents view these day-to-day problems in very different ways. Take for example a teen's responsibility of caring for his room. For many teens, the neatness of their bedrooms is not a main concern. Friends and activities outside the home are often their central priorities. For many parents, their teens' lack of care for their bedrooms may make them feel like the teens do not respect the parents' values. The good news is many sloppy teens respect their parents and grow up to be responsible adults. But until they become responsible for their own homes, they may not feel that housecleaning is very important. What is a frustrated parent to do in the meantime?

Many parents of teens find themselves constantly pleading with their teens to clean their rooms, cleaning the teen's room themselves, or having to just accept a teen's messy room. Is there a way to talk with your teen that will make a difference?

**G**eorge and his mother have been battling over this issue for several months. George's mother is feeling frustrated because George's room is always a mess. George's view is that his room is his private space that he can maintain as he pleases. If he does not mind the mess, why should his mother? When George's mom yells at him for his lack of responsibility and grounds him for the weekend, nothing has been done to successfully solve the problem. George and his mother become more convinced that this problem is a "battle of the wills" rather than something that can be solved together. What is another way of handling this?

Mom and George will make more progress if they are willing to have some give and take about George's room, since teens do need space that is their own. Mom and George could discuss the main things that need to be cleaned or organized in George's room, such as no food in the room, or dirty clothes that are to be put in a hamper or basket. George and his mother can discuss the types of rewards that will be gained or lost depending upon his keeping his part of the bargain. Reaching an agreement that both mom and George like may take a little time. Putting their agreement in writing is a good way to increase the likelihood of George's cooperation. George's mother also must follow through by giving or taking away privileges according to the agreement. For George to hold up his end of the agreement, his mother must hold up hers.

## What to do when talking is going nowhere.

Talking is not always easy between a parent and a teen. Sometimes no matter how hard you try to communicate with your teen, it seems nothing is getting through or your teen is hearing the wrong message. When this happens, it is necessary to reconsider "HOW" you are communicating with your teen. Another publication in this series that offers helpful information about how to communicate effectively in families is Extension publication HE-0686, "Communication: Building a Strong Bridge Between You and Your Children."

### Communication Closers and Openers

Things that close the door to good communication with your teen include:

- talking down to your teen
- being judgmental and critical of your teen
- refusing to listen to your teen's point of view

You can open the door to good communication with your teen if you:

- Make it clear that you are ready and willing to listen to your teen. "I really care about what you think." "Your ideas are important to me." "Tell me how you see it."
- Let your teen know you are working to understand his perspective. "What I am understanding you to say is...." "So what is really important to you is...." After saying what you heard your teen say, ask if you got it right—"Is that right?"
- Express your willingness to work together with your teen to arrive at a decision. "Let's each offer some ideas for how to deal with this." "How would you do it?" "What do you think should happen?"
- Take time to connect with your child every day—a meal together, a few minutes each evening before going to bed, longer periods of time together on the weekend...
- Find activities that you enjoy doing together. Sometimes teens find it difficult to share what is on their minds during face-to-face conversation. Doing an activity together, such as playing games on the computer, preparing a meal together, working on a hobby, or traveling around town can make conversation flow more easily. Teens will say more when they feel relaxed.

- Permit your teen some privacy. Teens need time to themselves and the right not to share everything with their parents. They will be more willing to share the important things with you if they feel respected by you. Permitting independence from you is a great way to show a teen respect.

- Allow your teen to have opinions that differ from yours. The freedom for teens to have their own ideas and views helps teens to become emotionally mature as they move toward adulthood and need to think on their own.

Communicating with *class* makes talking easier.

	What to do	Why it matters
<p><b>Be Clear and Calm</b></p> 	<p>If your teen breaks rules, be calm in dealing with him. It's okay to take a break and relax before you talk with your child. Once you feel calm, sit down with your child and let him know why you are disappointed in his actions, the consequences for his actions, and the actions you want him to take in the future.</p>	<p>Your teen needs for you to have rules for his behavior, but he needs to understand the rules and the rules should be appropriate for his age. When you remain calm, you help your teen to be calm, and you get your message across the way you intend.</p>
<p><b>Listen</b></p> 	<p>To hear what your teen is saying and make sure you understand her point of view, find a quiet place away from a noisy television and other people. Give her your full attention by looking at her while she talks and nodding your head. Share with her what you heard her say and ask her if you got it right.</p>	<p>Teens want to feel that they matter. Listening to her is a powerful way to let your teen know that she is important to you. Teens will seek out people who listen to them. You want to be one of those people.</p>
<p><b>Accept</b></p> 	<p>Tell your teen you love her often. Let your teen know what you think is special and wonderful about her every week. When your teen disappoints you, tell your teen that you are disappointed in her behavior, not her.</p>	<p>Your teen is a unique person, separate from you. She needs to feel that you accept her for who she is, even when she does things you do not like. Teens learn best from their mistakes if they have caring people in their lives who think they are special, no matter what. Feeling special and understood is what helps a teen have better self worth.</p>

	What to Do	Why it Matters
 <p><b>Support</b></p>	<p>If you teen says she needs you, make yourself available to be there. Remind your teen that you are in her corner and available to help her deal with problems and decisions. Let your teen know that you do not expect her to be perfect. When she makes mistakes, help her to learn important lessons from them and to think about ways to not make the same mistakes again.</p>	<p>No matter how old they are, teens need their parents' support. Although they may think they are ready to take on the world, they know they are not ready to do it without their parents' help. Being there to help them when they need it, allowing them to make mistakes along the way, is helping your teen to gain the strength she needs to be independent from you when the time comes.</p>
 <p><b>Seek Solutions</b></p>	<p>Tell your teen you want to work through the problem with him. Let him know that you believe there is a way to solve it. Talk together about what each of you thinks might make things better. Try out some of your ideas. If you find that you and your teen are not able to find a solution that works, find other people who can help. Family members, friends, or professionals can assist you and your teen to work through difficult problems.</p>	<p>There are solutions to problems no matter how difficult. You will be better able to help your teen work through problems if you believe there are ways to resolve them. Communicating this belief helps teens to feel better about their abilities to make positive changes in their lives.</p>

**If you want to learn more...**

Elkind, D. 1994. *Parenting your teenager*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Patterson, G. R., and M. S. Forgatch. 1987. *Parents and adolescents living together, Part 1: The basics*. Eugene, OR: Castalia.

Forgatch, M. S., and G. R. Patterson. 1989. *Parents and adolescents living together, Part 2: Family problem solving*. Eugene, OR: Castalia.

Steinberg, L. D., and A. Levine. 1997. *You and your adolescent: a parent's guide for ages 10 to 20*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.



HE-0780

**Jennifer Kerpelman**, Associate Dean, Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

**For more information**, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

Reviewed March 2013, HE-0780