

Tips for Talking with Teens

Creating positive conversations with teens



Having daily, pleasant conversations with your teens is an important part of bonding that helps keep them safe from alcohol and drugs. But it isn't easy. Teens claim parents only talk about uncompleted homework or chores. Parents say teens are uncommunicative and uninterested. So they both avoid talking. But teens need parental support and guidance during these difficult years. So daily take time to begin friendly conversations on topics that interest them—without any prying or reprimands. That will make it easier to discuss more difficult topics when you need to, like not using alcohol or drugs, or engaging in casual sex.

Use these tips and scripts to enjoy meaningful conversation with your teen.

1. Look for opportunities to talk that arise in everyday life, to start conversations. Also look for quiet moments—and ask if it's a good time to talk.

2. Begin by expressing appreciation for the good things you notice or admire about them.

3. Use a caring tone of voice and positive body language: a smile, nod, friendly face, etc. Be empathetic, positive and encouraging throughout the conversation.

4. Give your undivided attention, even if they prefer to sit next to you to avoid eye contact.

5. Use “LUV-Listening” skills of listening without interrupting; repeating back main ideas to show understanding; and validating their feelings by saying things like, “That must have made you feel . . . That's too bad.”

6. Use “I-Messages.” Use respectful “I-Messages” to express your own feelings and thoughts. Begin with “I” and then respectfully state how you feel and why you feel that way. Be specific in what you want and don't assign blame. Avoid “You” Messages.

7. Ask open-ended questions, often and casually, about things they are interested in: music, sports, celebrities, friends, TV shows, or movies; who they sat with at lunch; what they like to do for fun; what they think about current events, etc.

8. Respect their right to have a different point of view, even if you disagree. Don't make every conversation a debate.

9. Encourage teens to tell you about problems they may be having, and assure them that you'll try to understand and won't judge or reprimand. Use the Problem Pass.

10. Don't offer solutions unless they ask for advice. Instead, listen, and ask what options they are considering; express confidence in their ability to find solutions. Say, “If you would like to explore any of my thoughts on the subject, let me know.”

11. Ask about school. Find out which classes are hardest and offer to assist or get them help if needed. Help them finish homework before play, TV, or social media.

12. Ask about friends. Find out which friends help kids be their best selves. Encourage and support good friendships.

Conversation Extenders

- “What do you think?”
- “How so?”
- “I didn't know that.”
- “That's helpful. Tell me more.”
- “That's interesting. Keep going.”
- “That's a good question.”
- “Would you like to share more about that?”
- “Can you be more specific?”
- “Good point.”
- “In what way?”
- “That seems important to you.”
- “Do you want to talk about it?”
If they say “No”: “I'm here if you change your mind.”
- “I'm so sorry that happened to you . . . What can you do now?”
- What options are you considering?
- Do you need any advice? Would you like to brainstorm solutions?