



# How to Talk to Your Teen: Tips for Parents

Ongoing, open communication between kids and parents is one of the most powerful factors in supporting teen mental and physical health. Research shows that good communication between parents and kids decreases teen risk-taking behaviors, reduces adolescent substance abuse, and improves teen mental health overall.

But having deeper conversations with a teen isn't always easy. In fact, having any sort of conversation can be difficult with a moody teen. Here are some suggestions for clearing the path to open communication.

## How to Start a Conversation: The Do's and Don'ts

Whether you want to address something significant or just have a friendly chat, breaking the ice with a teen can be tough. Here are some do's and don'ts for starting a conversation—in the car, at the dinner table, or anytime.

- ✓ **Don't** ask "So is everything fine?" When you ask a child if everything is fine, you're giving them the message that you want everything to be fine. They don't want to disappoint you, so they're more likely to just nod in response and let you believe that everything's fine, even if it isn't.
- ✓ **Do** give your kids the sense that you're open to anything they have to say, whether positive or not so positive. Thus, they're more likely to share what's going on in their lives.
- ✓ **Don't** ask questions that are too general, like "How was your day?" often produce one-word answers like "Good" or "Okay" that don't give you any information about what your child is really feeling.
- ✓ **Do** ask specific yet open-ended questions like "How was your get-together with so-and-so?" or "How did that test go?"
- ✓ **Don't** focus on serious, emotional topics all the time. Not every conversation has to be deep and meaningful—unless your teen wants it to be. Avoid opening a conversation with a loaded phrase like "We need to talk" or "There are some things I need to say to (or ask) you"—this can put a teen on edge or on their guard before the conversation even begins.
- ✓ **Do** talk about trivial things sometimes. Watch a movie or TV show together and discuss it. Read the same book and compare your views. Talk about the latest celebrity gossip or fashion. Anything that engages your teen—without being overly negative or critical—is great. The idea is to stay in practice so that deeper conversations don't feel like as much of a stretch.



## 4 Ways to Make Communication Part of Every Day

**Build in regular check-in times.** A weekly sit-down as a family can nip potential conflicts in the bud. Set a time that works well for everyone and don't rush through the conversation. Try asking questions like, What worked well for us this week? Does anyone have particular requests or needs this week? It's a lot easier to process issues when you're not at a point of crisis.

**Play a sharing game at the dinner table.** Go around the table and play your favorite variation of the game known as "Rose, Thorn, and Bud." Each person shares their rose (the best moment of the day), their thorn (the most challenging moment of the day) and their bud (something they're excited or hopeful about).

**Find places for communication in your regular routine.** Driving in the car, walking, shopping, or saying goodnight to your teen are all opportunities for low-pressure conversations. Sometimes it's easier for a teen to open up when they're not in face-to-face contact (as when driving or walking), or when it's dark in the room before bed.

**Write to your teen.** If talking is a bit tough for you and/or your child, try using texts or e-mails to communicate occasionally. The written word is sometimes easier to absorb for teens—whether it's an explanation of why you've set a limit, or simply an expression of love and appreciation. And teenagers might appreciate the opportunity to express themselves in writing, rather than trying to find the right words in the heat of the moment.

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## 5 Steps to Communicating Limits

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Establishing limits for an adolescent is often necessary—whether it's around technology use, chores, curfew and bedtime, using the car, etc. But parents also need to respect teens enough to explain the reasons behind their decisions. "Because I said so" or "You'll understand when you're a parent" are not helpful statements when communicating limits to a teen. On the contrary, these classic parental fallbacks are guaranteed to increase a teenager's frustration.

Instead, try these five steps for communicating limits to your teen.

- 1. Start with love, and listen closely.** Most important: Always begin the conversation with an attitude of loving acceptance. Before you talk, let your teen say their piece, and don't interrupt. Listen patiently and show with your facial expression and with a nod or two that you care about what they have to say.
- 2. Acknowledge how they feel and what they want.** It's critical for adolescents to feel understood and validated. Once they've presented their case, make it clear that you believe their request or complaint is important and worth addressing. Make sure they know that you're not angry with them because of their request. Your teenager's request can be quite valid for them, even if it doesn't seem that way to you.
- 3. Explain why you don't think it's the right thing.** Tell your teen, "I understand why you



want to do this, and here's why I don't think it's a good idea." (Using the word "and" rather than "but" is a good way to honor their feelings.) Then list the reasons. But don't go into too much detail: The prefrontal cortex—the reasonable, responsible part of the brain—is still developing in adolescents, so trying to appeal to their common sense doesn't usually work.

#### 4. Clarify how it's going to work.

Lay out the guidelines, and the consequences if they choose to ignore the limits. Remind them that they have the choice to respect or reject the rules, but rejection will lead to appropriate consequences.

#### 5. Consider drafting a written agreement.

This way, you'll be 100 percent sure that you're both on the same page. And negotiation is acceptable if you feel there's room for compromise. Avoid power struggles at all costs, however.



## Tips for Staying Calm and Centered in a Conversation

Conversations with a teenager can be stressful. But if you're able to regulate your own emotions during a charged discussion, chances are your teen will do better, too, and the conversation will go better for both of you. Try these methods for keeping your cool.

- ✓ **Breathe and relax.** Take long, slow, deep breaths, which activates your parasympathetic ("rest and digest") nervous system and slows your heart rate. As you breathe, notice where you're holding tension in your body and consciously release it.
- ✓ **Don't take it personally.** Your teen is developing their identity and opinions, and part of that is disagreeing with and pushing back against what they perceive as parental control. Remember, this is not about how good or bad of a parent you are.
- ✓ **Remind yourself that you are a role model.** The way you conduct yourself in a conversation shows your child how productive—or how messy—communication can be. Remind yourself how important it is for you to serve as a positive example, and let this be an incentive to avoid yelling, getting overly emotional, or blaming your teen.
- ✓ **Take a timeout.** If you sense that you're not getting anywhere, or either you or your teen is too worked up to continue talking, take a timeout. Tell your teen you're going to pause the conversation and revisit it later.



# 10 Questions to Ask as Part of a Teen Mental Health Check-In

Adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicide risk are at all-time highs right now. When families have ongoing, open communication, it's easier for parents to notice potential warning signs and ensure that young people receive additional support if needed.



Asking specific questions can help parents perform a “mental health temperature check,” and may also help teens to better recognize and manage their emotions. Here are 10 questions to ask as.

1. **What three words best describe how you're feeling right now?**
2. **On a scale of 1 to 10, going from negative to positive, what number best describes your state of mind?**
3. **Fill in the blank: Something I've been thinking about a lot lately is ...**
4. **If your feelings were weather, what kind of day would it be outside?**
5. **If your life was a movie, what songs would be on the soundtrack right now?**
6. **What would you like to have less of in your life right now?**
7. **What would you like to have more of in your life right now?**
8. **Tell me about the best thing and the worst thing that happened to you this week.**
9. **What's the hardest part about being you right now?**
10. **How can I support you better?**

Depending on a teen's personality and communication style, some of these emotional check-in questions might be more effective than others in eliciting answers that illuminate their state of mind.

In conclusion, talking to your teen is worth it. Keep at it, even when it seems uncomfortable or intimidating. The more often you communicate, the easier and more enjoyable it will become.

**Questions regarding teen or young adult mental health or substance abuse?**

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