

# *Building a Good Relationship with Your Teenager*

## **Overview**

Ways to deal positively with the changes adolescence brings to your family's life.

- Staying positive
- Developing a new relationship with your teenager
- Learning to set limits
- Dealing with conflicts and power struggles
- Negotiating solutions

Adolescence is a voyage of discovery. On this journey your teenager must deal with his changing body, strong (and often scary) feelings about sex, and a desire to rebel against authority -- yours included. At the end of this stage of life, he will have become someone who knows and lives by his own values. He will probably also be someone who respects and enjoys you, who holds many of the ideals you do, and who wants you to be involved in his life.

You can help your teenager through this important time of life by listening to his concerns, negotiating fairly, accepting that you can't control every aspect of his life, and learning to relax and take some things less seriously. You'll also need to find new ways to support your teenager and show that -- even if these years are sometimes difficult for both of you -- you will always love and support him.

## **Staying positive**

The teenage years will bring many challenges for you and your child. Having a positive attitude will help you deal smoothly with them. Seek out occasions for laughter, praise, and just pleasant conversation. It's important to do the following:

- *Enjoy and appreciate your teenager.* Take time to observe her good qualities and tell her how you feel: "I love to hear you sing," for example, or "I admire you for being so supportive of your friends."
- *Enter his world.* Get to know your teenager's friends. Offer to drive them places and encourage him to invite his friends to your home. Show an interest in the music he listens to, the clothes he buys, the books he reads.
- *Listen to your teenager's concerns.* When you're tempted to give advice, ask your teenager if you may make a suggestion. If she resists, back off. If she comes to you with troubling news, such as a bad report card, try not to lecture or say, "I told you so." Instead you might say, "I'm glad you told me. It's important to me that you can confide in me."
- *Be playful with your teen.* Relax and be yourself. Express your sense of humor. It's an act of trust to let down your guard in his presence. By your example, you're extending the same freedom to him.

## 2 • Building a Good Relationship with Your Teenager

- *Give praise and encouragement.* Tell your teenager you are proud of her achievements, great and small. You'll build her confidence by letting her know that she made a great salad for dinner or that you admire her computer skills.
- *Try giving your teenager more authority and independence in exchange for taking on more responsibility.* Your child needs to learn that power and authority bring responsibility. Look for ways to share power and decision-making with an older teenager. Try sharing the responsibility for making some decisions (such as where to go on a family vacation) with the understanding that the whole family will live with the consequences.
- *Make time to have family fun.* Visit a theme park, watch a horror movie, have dinner together at your favorite restaurant, or go bowling. Enjoy activities that are pure fun. These will help to ease the normal stresses of the teenage years and help you to stay close.
- *Reassure your teenager that it's OK to learn by making mistakes.* Send the message that nobody is perfect, including you. This will help your teenager feel free to come to you when he's made a mistake or has a concern.

### **Developing a new relationship with your teenager**

If you've been trying to control your teenager and found that it's impossible, you're right. Your "child" is no longer a child.

To stay connected to your teenager, you'll need to explore new ways of relating that involve giving up some of the control over her activities that you had when she was younger. Some of the best ways to do this are to be truthful, have a sense of humor, give unconditional love, try to pause before you show anger, and accept that at times you may be considered "the enemy."

- *Develop a new kind of relationship.* Try to avoid thinking of your teenager as someone who will go wild if you don't keep him under constant surveillance. Instead, try to see him as another smart, sensitive person. Start to think of yourself less as an authority figure and more as a coach and nurturer.
- *Listen to your teenager.* She'll probably be more willing to open up if she senses that you're really attuned to what she's saying. Make a habit of listening to her without interrupting. Your genuine interest will help build trust between you.
- *Express your true feelings.* Think about what you really mean before you speak. If you're tempted to say something like, "If I catch you drinking beer, I will ground you for the rest of the year," you may mean, "I'm afraid that you'll drink and drive and be hurt or killed." The first statement will put your teenager on the defensive. The second is more likely to help him understand your concerns.
- *Respect your teenager's boundaries.* Recognize that you can't solve all of your teenager's problems for her. This doesn't mean that you should ignore warning

signs that she may be involved in risky behavior. But it does mean that you need to respect her privacy and accept that she probably won't want to share everything with you as she did when she was very young.

#### **Learning to set limits**

Balancing your teenager's need for freedom and support shows respect for his growing independence. One way to do that is to set reasonable limits on what he can and can't do.

Here are some guidelines:

- *Don't abuse your parental power.* Your teenager may rebel if you expect him to obey you just because you're the parent. Instead, try explaining that you're responsible for the safety of the family, and that requires you to set rules.
- *Know your non-negotiable rules.* As a parent, you have the right to set some non-negotiable rules, which may involve health, safety, or deeply felt beliefs. It's usually best if there are only a few such rules and if you can clearly explain why they exist. Your non-negotiable rules might include the following:
  - No hanging out with anyone who uses drugs.
  - No parties at your home if you're not there.
- *Set negotiable rules with your teenager.* These rules involve some flexibility and may relate to behavior you'd like to see.
  - Keep your room clean and relatively neat (clothes picked up, trash in waste basket, food returned to kitchen).
  - Care for a younger sibling two days a week after school.

#### **Dealing with conflicts and power struggles**

Even if you and your teenager get along well, you're likely to have conflicts and power struggles at times. Here are some ways to keep your disagreements from damaging your relationships:

##### **Making -- and breaking -- rules**

- *Keep your expectations realistic.* As a parent, you'll need to have "house rules." But you'll also need to realize that your teenager may occasionally break these.
- *Talk to your teenager when she's broken a rule.* Remind her of the rule and why it is important. Explain that breaking the rule is not okay and that the rule is still in effect.
- *Let your teenager know the consequences of breaking a rule.* Always follow through with consequences and make them fair and fitting. For example, if your teenager returns the car with an empty gas tank, he might have to fill up the gas tank, then wash and wax the car the next day.

#### 4 • Building a Good Relationship with Your Teenager

- *If your rules aren't working, be willing to change them.* Let your teenager know that you are there to listen to her concerns. Be flexible enough to make new rules if the ones you have don't serve you both well.
- *Remember to focus on important issues.* It's not good for you or your teenager if all of your interactions are negative, so limit the number of rules you set. Focus on the issues that may risk your teen's health or safety. Your teen's choice of clothing or whether his room is neat are not as critical as staying away from alcohol and drugs.

#### The "good" fight: Settling conflicts fairly

- *Try to avoid taking challenges to your authority personally.* One of the hardest tasks for parents of teenagers is finding a way to avoid being hurt by normal adolescent rebellion. If you do feel hurt or angry, try not to speak until you are able to reply calmly. If necessary, excuse yourself and take a few hours or even a day to calm down.
- *Never hit a teenager.* Hitting sends the message that using physical force is OK. Find appropriate words and actions to express your opinions.
- *Respect your teenager's right to express her views.* Even if she's being hostile, irrational, or repetitious, she needs to express herself.
- *Get more information.* In a heated argument that's going nowhere, consider requesting more information from your teenager. You might say, "Tell me why this is so important to you," "What do you really want?" or "What can I do to help you?"
- *Practice love with no strings.* Show your teenager that you can be angry with someone and still love that person. After an unusually heated discussion, say "I love you" or give him a hug if he's open to it -- even if he isn't yet ready to say, "I love you, too."
- *Seek professional help should the conflicts be intense or frequent.* Your child's pediatrician or the school counselor or school psychologist can recommend helpful community mental health services.

#### Negotiating solutions

Negotiating fairly will help you resolve disagreements with your teenager. Communicating well is a key to good negotiating. You'll communicate more effectively with your teenager if you do the following:

- *Send "I" messages.* These messages are non-judgmental statements about how you feel. They usually begin with, "I feel X about Y because Z." Instead of blaming your teenager, you explain how an action or a situation affects you. "I'm frustrated by your choice of friends because I'm afraid they will be a bad influence on you."

## 5 • Building a Good Relationship with Your Teenager

- *Focus on the situation or behavior -- not the person.* For example, “We agreed to keep the music turned down after 10 p.m.” instead of, “You’re so inconsiderate!” or “Turn down that awful noise!”
- *Brainstorm by rapidly listing solutions to a problem.* Brainstorming lets both of you participate in the problem-solving process without criticizing someone else’s ideas. After all the ideas have been presented, go back and evaluate them. See which one may work best.
- *Be flexible.* Less-than-perfect solutions that work are better than perfect solutions that don’t happen. You can always renegotiate an agreement if one you’ve made isn’t effective.

If you’d like to build a stronger relationship with your teenager, remember that the program that provided this publication has many helpful resources.

Raising a teenager takes patience. But it doesn’t have to be a continual battle. If you are open to the adventure, you can learn and laugh a lot. And even if she can’t express it in words, your teenager will appreciate the loving commitment you made on her behalf.

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