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Looking to Connect With Your Teen? Do These Things Today!

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5 tips for improving the relationship with your teenager

by: **Andrea Nair**

The compounding effects of physical awkwardness, their desire for independence, and the mean behavior of other students can be overwhelming for a teenager. Although it is really hard to offer relationship-rescue information in a short article, I wanted to share five ideas that might help you stay connected with your teen, and to support him or her better through this wild time.

1. Have regular "what are you okay with" chats. Take your teenager aside and offer that you still want to spend time with him and hug him, but you understand that can be embarrassing to him. On the flip side, ask your child to let you know what *he's* okay with—can you hug him in front of his friends? Drop him off right in front of his school? Does commenting or "liking" something on Facebook make him want to hide under a rock?

2. Make "attachment time" before school and when you get home. It is easy to hit the ground running in the morning and be on your kid's back about getting up or getting out the door on time, but that can set the stage for negativity. I find that waking up a bit earlier, and getting ready before the kids are up, helps me sidestep that "rush" mode. Getting organized the night before with backpacks, signed letters, homework, and lunch ideas means you don't have to harp on those tasks first thing in the morning, and instead can focus on positive interactions with your child.

Similarly, when you see each other later in the day, make time to reconnect before jumping into food prep and activity or homework time. When everyone is relaxed, encourage your child to tell his or her story; what's happening at school? With their friends? What's their favorite music right now? Use paraphrasing and empathetic listening to get your child to open up. Try something like, "So I see you are spending more time with Jeff these days."

Remember, too, that teens open up better when they aren't face-to-face with someone. Conversations over washing the car, walking, and driving have been shown to be more effective than talks that happen when you're looking at your teen.

3. Watch your "nice-to-nag" ratio. The teen years are a time in which to really pick your battles. Too much nagging will cause your teen to tune you out, so monitor yourself. What percentage of the time are you giving your teen instructions or correction versus positive attention and listening? You might notice that if your nagging is too frequent, your child might isolate himself, want to be away from you, or respond sharply.

4. Don't panic! This is the most common time to be using drugs, drinking alcohol, and getting into sexual activity. The more secretive teens are about these things, the more risk-taking they will likely try. Remember to engage them in enough chats about these topics to let them know you care and that these aren't taboo areas of conversation—but not so much to scare them off. Risk-taking is normal for teenagers, so your job isn't to stop them, but to help develop their ability to manage a tricky situation. Please remember to not judge or correct what they say.

A good approach to engaging teens in these topics is to ask their opinion—"So, it's pretty normal for kids to get into drinking at this age. Do you think parents should let their kids drink at home?" If your child happens to answer, "Sure, that sounds great!" don't snap! Stay calm and paraphrase back with suggestions to grow his rational mind, like, "So you think it's okay for kids to drink at home, then what should the parent do if a kid hurts himself? Who is responsible in that case?"

Also, provide health information, and, again, ask your teen's opinion. A great place to start is this widely published study that found smoking pot is harmful to a teenager's brain: Show your teen the article and ask about his or her thoughts on the article or topic in general. Your being open to talking about drugs in a general sense may help you learn more about his specific experiences, and can help strengthen your relationship.

Provide information and create invitations to openness without taking away your teen's power to make choices. The goal is to get them thinking critically and not feel like you are telling them what to do.

5. Find lots of different ways to show your teen matters. The crying "rebellious" teens and parents who have been in my office for one-on-one counseling often have the same goal—each wishes they mattered more to the other. What they don't realize is that they do matter, but the other person just doesn't know how to communicate it. Do not assume your child knows how much you care. Be conscious of ways to express this. And, yes, your teen still wants you to hug him or her.

On the days when you notice your teen's slumped shoulders, mumbling, or sad eyes, reminding him of how much he matters will help you both support him and get to the heart of what's causing his grief.

"Parents should remember that one of the developmental aspects of the adolescent years is for teens to develop their own identities, separate from their parents. So at the same time you are making every effort to stay connected, you also want to show acceptance and respect for the young adult they are becoming." (Marilyn Price-Mitchell PhD., Developmental psychologist,

And what if your attempts are met with seeming hostility? When a teen says something like, "I hate you," you are being given valuable information—things are not okay in his or her world. So find a way to hear what your child has to say. All teens have a story and just want someone who will listen. Let that person be you.