



This worksheet is one of a series aimed at supporting caregivers to parent their teenagers. The 4 worksheets include: 1) Youth development, 2) Boundaries, 3) Building health family relationships, and 4) Communication. We recommend you discuss these worksheets with your young person's clinician.

Communication within families is extremely important. Open and honest communication enables family members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other. It helps family members feel listened to and supported as well as deepen each others love and admiration for each other.

Just as effective communication is found in well functioning families, poor communication often contributes to unhealthy family dynamics. Poor communication is unclear and indirect which leads to family conflict, ineffective problem solving, a lack of closeness and unhappiness.

As children enter their teenage years they tend to communicate with parents less. This is normal, however it happens at a time when they need their parent's input most. Parents and caregivers need to make a specific effort to promote good communication within the family, even though their young person may seem to want the opposite.

Here are a few suggestions for improving communication and the quality of relationship with your teenager.

TIPS FOR IMPROVING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

1. COMMUNICATE OFTEN

Spending time together is really important. You can't get in the habit of talking to each other if there is not the opportunity to do so. One to one time with your teenager a few times a week, even if brief, is better than nothing.

Get creative. You may have to engineer opportunities to communicate if they don't occur spontaneously. This could include talking in the car, talking at bedtime, turning off the TV and talking, eating together or talking to your teenager while doing the dishes. Don't be disappointed or take it personally if it doesn't work out every time - you

need to keep at it. Once your teenager sees that you are serious about talking regularly with them (this may take time) they will begin to participate too.

2. BE CLEAR AND DIRECT

Communicating in a way where you say one thing but mean something else is unhealthy and seldom promotes good relationships. Sarcasm, for example, is often demeaning to the person being communicated with and will lead to resentment.

Stop to think about exactly what you want to communicate and say it in a straightforward and unambiguous way. Use simple language and be direct in your approach.

Which is more direct communication?

- 'I would like you to help me with the dishes', or 'You kids never help in the kitchen'.
- 'I suppose you'll be home late again tonight?' or 'Where exactly are you going tonight and what time will you be home?'
- 'Are you going to sleep all day?' or 'I'd like you get up now please.'

It is especially important to be clear and direct when resolving problems with your young person. Make sure they understand and then move on. On the other hand nagging is seldom an effective communication strategy, particularly with teenagers.

3. SHOW THAT YOU ARE LISTENING

Make sure that you really do listen to your teenager when they are ready to talk.

Show them that you are listening by saying things like 'I understand' or 'I accept that'. Seeking clarification 'Do you mean...' also demonstrates you are listening.



Show them that you are trying to understand their point of view by asking open ended questions. Open ended questions (questions that need more than a "yes" or "no" to answer) show that you care and want to know more, as well as provide you with more information.

Some useful tips for being an active listener include;

- looking at your teenager
- stop what you are doing to give them your full attention
- listen to what is being said without interrupting
- attempt to clarify what they said to make sure they know you have understood them.



Teenagers may choose to talk to you at inconvenient or unexpected times. If communication is an issue in your family then you may need to take the opportunity to listen, even if it is a bad time. Postponing the conversation risks it not happening at all.

Trying to listen and understand how your teenager feels does not mean you agree with their behaviour but it shows them that you accept and care about them regardless of what they have done.

3. BE ENCOURAGING

Criticising and nagging of your teenager is an ineffective way to communicate and it often becomes a key reason why your teenager won't come and talk to you.

A good way to turn this around is trying to be constructive and positive. Rather than going on about their mistakes, failures or things they forgot to do, talk about positive things. Remind them of their successes, accomplishments and interests. Praising and encouraging good behaviour or actions is a great way to encourage more of it.

When you do need to comment negatively, focus on the behaviour not your teenager. Communication that gets personal is usually ineffective.

For example don't say, 'Don't talk to me like that you spoilt brat', rather say, 'I don't want you using language like that in the house thank you'. Similarly

don't say 'You're so lazy' instead say 'I'd really appreciate you helping me with the dishes'.

5. BE OPEN AND TELL THE TRUTH.

Teenagers want to know the truth so don't try and 'protect' them. Tell them what you think and why. Honesty is the best policy. Anything else will lead to secrets and allegiances developing. Your teenager may not agree or like what you say but they will respect you for being honest. And if you are honest with them, they are more likely to be honest with you.

'For some reason my son would only talk to me just as I was walking out the door to go to work. He was having trouble at school but didn't want to think about it after school, rather he left it until the next morning. I soon realised that this wouldn't change and so I started to leave for work earlier, so that if he did want to talk, I wouldn't be late.'

Jackie, mother of Nate.

BE A ROLE MODEL

The best way to communicate is via actions, rather than your words. Be the person you want your kids to grow up to be.

Despite the strong influence of peers, parents are still the most influential people in a young person's life. Teenagers learn their values, how to behave, how to react and how to treat people mainly from you. Role model to them those values that are important to you.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Think about the communication you have with your teenager:

- *What are some of the reasons why communication breaks down?*
- *Are there times your communication seems to work well? What was different?*
- *What could you do to make it easier for your teenager to come and share their worries?*
- *Do other family members affect your communication with your teenager and how might you change this?*