

Guidelines For Communicating With Teens

It is common for parents and professionals alike to feel as though they simply cannot understand teens or the behaviors they display. Teens themselves often feel as if nobody understands them. Learning to communicate effectively creates opportunities for understanding, as well as possibilities for positively influencing teens. As a means of promoting effective communication, the following guidelines are suggested:

- **Actively seek out the “good”.** In general, teens are accustomed to frequent complaints from parents and other adults regarding both their attitudes and their behaviors. Although the behavior of teens typically warrant such complaints and their attitudes often invite negative remarks, it is important to weigh the outcome of such responses. As long as teens are receiving ongoing negative messages about themselves, there is a strong likelihood that the teens will internalize the messages and behave accordingly. Instead of reinforcing what is “bad” or wrong about the teens, try to give them something different to internalize which will then likely impact their behavior in a positive manner. Make it a point to know the talents, gifts, and interests of the teens. Talk to them about ways to use their gifts and talents in a practical way and assist them in setting goals or establishing plans.
- **Prioritize your relationship with your teen.** The main reason the peers of teens have such a great deal of influence on them may be explained by the value placed on the relationships they have with their friends. Teens feel understood and accepted by their friends. This sense of understanding and acceptance lends itself to influence. In order for parents and/or other adults to effectively guide and positively influence teens, the bond between the adult and teen must be preserved. One of the most powerful ways to maintain the bond is through validation of the teen’s feelings. Validation involves sending a message that conveys that the teen’s feelings are both understandable and normal. Sending validating messages about one’s feelings is entirely different than agreeing with or condoning certain behaviors. It does not mean that parents or adults have to agree with the perceptions of the teens. Parents and adults may, in fact, have the opportunity later to offer a different perspective in an effort to guide and positively influence the teen. However, this will not likely occur if steps are not taken to first normalize and understand the teens’ feelings.
- **Avoid reducing to the teen’s level during conflict.** Most teens know exactly what buttons to push to send parents and other adults to the outermost extremes of anger and frustration. Being mindful of this and preparing in advance will go a long way towards preserving the bond between the adult and teen. It is critical to act as an adult and model appropriate behavior during conflict with a teen. If the teen shouts “I hate you,” it will be far more effective in the long run for the parent or adult to express understanding of the teen’s anger and reinforce feelings of love than to engage in a counter attack. Also, it is important to keep in mind that any attacks on the friends of the teens will almost always be perceived as a

personal assault on the teens themselves.

- **Choose your battles wisely.** Avoid giving much attention to behaviors that serve as a demonstration of the teens' attempts to individuate and express themselves. It is common for parents to experience some level of embarrassment based upon the manner in which the teen's appearance serves as an expression of individuality. However, it is important to keep in mind that unsightly changes to the teen's appearance are mere attempts at self-expression and typically no more than a passing phase. Parents and adults use their influence more wisely when focusing on concerns that are central to the well-being of the teen, such as, academics, avoiding the use of substances, practicing abstinence or safe sex, avoiding peer pressure, and driving responsibly.
- **Instill beliefs, values, and expectations through daily activities.** It is often more effective to communicate with teens while engaged in some type of daily activity, rather than asking them to sit quietly and provide their full attention while parents or adults present lectures on their beliefs, values, or expectations. Engaging the teen through casual conversation may decrease the teens' tendency to respond defensively or "tune out" the messages the parents or adults are trying to instill. It also encourages open communication and opportunities for parents or adults to listen and understand through a natural flow of conversation.