

Communicating with your Tween

by
Dr. David Lowenstein

It's no secret that young adolescents often are typically poor communicators, particularly with their parents and other adults who love them. Many psychologists have found, however, that when parents know where their children are and what they are doing (and when the adolescent knows the parent knows, what psychologists call **monitoring**), adolescents are at a lower risk for a range of bad experiences, including drug, alcohol and tobacco use, sexual behavior, pregnancy, delinquency and violence.

The key to helping to prevent these negative behaviors and experiences is communication. It's important to be inquisitive but to not interfere with your tween's life, and work to respect your child's privacy as you establish trust and closeness.

Here are a few ways to do this:

There is no recipe for successful communication. What works for getting one child to talk about what is important does not always work with another one. Be patient and try a variety of tactics to see what seems to resonate with your child.

Listen. Avoid interrupting your child and pay close attention to what he or she is saying. This is best done in a quiet place with no distractions. It is hard to listen carefully if you are also trying to cook dinner or watch television. Often just talking with your child about a problem or an issue helps to clarify things. Sometimes the less you offer advice, the more your young teen may ask you for it. Listening can also be the best way to uncover a more serious problem that requires your attention.

Create opportunities to talk. To communicate with your child you need to make yourself available. Young adolescents resist "scheduled" talks; they do not open up when you tell them to, but when **they** want to. Some young teens like to talk when they first get home from school. Others may like to talk at the dinner table or at bedtime. Some parents talk with their children in the car on the way to or from school. Many of the best conversations grow out of shared activities.

Talk over differences. Communication breaks down for some parents because they find it hard to manage differences with their child. It is often easiest to limit these differences when you put in place clear expectations. If your 13-year-old daughter knows she has to be home by 9:30 p.m. (even if she doesn't agree with you) and if she knows the consequences of not meeting this curfew, the likelihood that she will be home on time increases.

Lowenstein & Associates

691 South Fifth Street • Columbus, Ohio 43206
(614) 443-6155

When differences arise, sharing concerns with your child firmly but calmly can prevent differences from becoming battles. Explaining why you believe your young adolescent made (or wants to make) a poor choice is more constructive.

Avoid overreacting. Responding too strongly can lead to flared tempers and it can shut down conversation. Try to keep anxiety and emotions out of the conversation—then kids will open up. Instead of getting riled up, it is better to ask, "What do you think about what you did? Let's talk about this."

At a time when they are already judging themselves critically, adolescents make themselves vulnerable when they open up to parents. The best way to encourage a behavior is to reward it. If you are critical when your teenager talks to you, what he sees is that his openness gets punished rather than rewarded.

Talk about things that are important to your young teen. Different youngsters like to talk about different things. Some of the things they talk about may not seem important to you, but try to put yourself in their place and time. By asking questions and listening, however, you can show your child that you respect his feelings and opinions.

Communicate with kindness and respect. Young teens can say or do things that are outrageous or mean-spirited or both. However hard your child pushes your buttons, it is best to respond calmly. The respect and self-control that you display in talks with your child may some day be reflected in her conversations with others.

How you say something is as important as what you say. "Stop picking at your face" can reduce a young adolescent to tears. "Your room looks like a pigsty" is not as helpful as, "You need to spend some time picking up your room. The job will be easier if you spend five minutes right now picking the clothes up off the floor—putting the dirty ones in the hamper and hanging the clean ones up. After lunch you can spend five minutes straightening up your bookshelf." Youngsters also pay attention to the tone of your voice. A 10-year-old can easily tell a calm voice from an angry one.

Communicating with your young teen can be quite a challenge. But if you taking the time to listen and learn your child's communication style will help you forge a lasting relationship built on mutual respect.

Dr. David Lowenstein is a psychologist with over 25 years of clinical experience in his private practice in Columbus, Ohio. He specializes in individual, group and family therapy with children and adolescents. Dr. Lowenstein conducts workshops for parent-teacher organizations nationwide on a variety of relevant topics. Visit his Web site at www.drlowenstein.com or contact him at drlowenstein@drlowenstein.com.