

## How to talk with your teen

The teenage years are full of change for both parents and teenagers. Not only are teens growing and changing physically, but they are developing their identity and becoming more independent.

The hormones that drive puberty and bring on its physical changes also affect how a teen thinks and feels. At the same time, major changes happen in the adolescent brain, influencing judgment, decision-making, and emotions. Teens test their limits and try very hard to fit into their peer groups. You might even think that your teen's friends have become more important to them than you and your family.

## Why is healthy communication important?

As your teen moves toward adulthood, it's normal and natural for them to put distance between themselves and family. But it's more important than ever to keep the lines of communication open. If your teen feels they can talk to you, then they know you will listen and consider their views, and chances are you have and will continue to have a healthy relationship.

By encouraging open and honest conversation, your teen is more likely to come to you for the important stuff—like relationships, school, sex, drugs—rather than turning to friends for help and guidance or feeling alone.

## Here are some tips to help you communicate with your teen:

- **Talk with your teen** about their interests (music, sports, hobbies, plans for the weekend, future goals). Show interest. For example, if your teen is interested in theatre and you prefer sports, have an open-mind and explore theatre with them.
- **Schedule family time.** All teens need to feel that they're a valued member of the family. Part of that will come from setting aside family time to do regular activities together, such as going to the movies, going for a hike or skating. Family meals are an excellent way to connect with each other and talk about the things that happened during the day. Research also shows that having at least one family meal a day can prevent your teen from experimenting with risky health behaviour. Spending time as a family will help you know your teen as they grow and develop.

- **Listen.** Teens want their parents to listen to their stories, concerns and feelings with patience, understanding, and acceptance. Your teen needs to believe they can share problems and issues, and know that you will support them. It's also a good idea to repeat their words when discussing what your teen tells you so that they know you understand.
- **Be prepared and willing** to discuss the things they want to talk about. Think about the things your teen might want to talk about (relationships, sex, drugs, alcohol) so that you are ready when they come to you with difficult questions or ideas.
- **Treat your teen with respect** and don't dismiss their feelings or opinions. Find ways to discuss and acknowledge your differences without judging. Listen to your teen's point of view with an open mind. Active listening will help your teen feel important, know that you take their concerns seriously, and will strengthen your relationship. As teens grow they also develop real expertise in things. Try to recognize your teen's knowledge and learn from them too.
- **Be trustworthy.** Don't make fun of your teen, or share their personal stories with others. Respecting your teen's desire for privacy is important. If you do, they are more likely to talk about issues like violence, abuse, harassment or severe mood problems.
- **Stay calm,** and try not to get frustrated. Your questions and tone of voice might put your teen on the defensive.
- **Offer help.** The challenge is to be involved without intruding and to let your teen know you are always available. Ask your teen if they would like some advice. Sometimes, teens are not interested in advice but just want to talk. Ask them how they think they should handle an issue they've brought up. This allows them to bounce ideas around, without you telling them what to do.
- **Encourage** your teen to take on age-appropriate chores and responsibilities that will prepare them for adulthood. For example, if your child doesn't learn how to make their lunch by 13-14, they are not going to suddenly start doing it right when they move out. Embrace opportunities for growth.
- **Avoid lectures.** If your teen's stories spark a lecture from you, they will be less likely to share with you another time. Express your concerns, but know that it's normal for teens to experiment. Be upfront about the rules and consequences.
- **Keep it short** and to the point. Teens generally won't stay focused for long conversations.
- **Plan.** Set aside regular time to catch up, or talk about issues your teen is facing. Another good place to talk with your teen is while travelling together in the car, when you have a captive audience.
- **Don't rely on texting.** While text messages can be a good way to keep in touch with your teen, try to have more important conversations in person. Texting leaves too much room for

misinterpretation and texts can easily be ignored.

- **Step away.** If a conversation becomes emotional or heated, it is probably a good idea to step away and come back to it when everyone has calmed down.
- **Be honest about your feelings.** If you are, your teen may be more open with you.

## When should I call the doctor?

Change is normal in the teenage years, but drastic or dramatic changes in your teen's behaviour or routine may be cause for concern.

Here are some warning signs to watch for:

- extreme weight gain or weight loss,
- sleep problems,
- significant irritability or ongoing problems with mood,
- sudden change in friends, or isolation,
- trouble at school, either with learning or behaviour,
- trouble with the law,
- overuse of electronic media like cell phones or smart phones, or
- signs of drug or alcohol use.

If your teen is showing trouble with any of these things, talk to your doctor.

**If your teen talks about suicide or harming themselves, call your doctor right away.**

## Additional resources

- Mental Health Resource Centre (SickKids)  
(<http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/En/HealthAZ/HealthandWellness/MentalHealth/Pages/default.aspx>)
- Cannabis Talk Kit: Know How To Talk With Your Teen (Drug Free Kids Canada)  
([https://www.drugfreekidsCanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit\\_EN.pdf](https://www.drugfreekidsCanada.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Cannabis-Talk-Kit_EN.pdf))
- How to Talk with Your Teen about Drugs - Communication Tips for Parents (Health Canada)  
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hc-ps/pubs/adp-apd/talk-aborder/index-eng.php>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Adolescent Health Committee
- Public Education Advisory Committee

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