

## TALKING TO TEENAGERS

Because adolescence is a time of developing personal identity, testing boundaries and increasing independence from family, communication can be contentious, argumentative and unsatisfying. Compounding the challenge is the fact that most teenagers believe they are a couple years older than they are and we, as parents, believe they are a couple years younger than they are. Add all this together and you have a pretty challenging environment in which to communicate with your teenager. So, how do you communicate effectively with your teenager?

Mike Riera, one of the country's foremost authorities on understanding children and teenagers, has an interesting take on the subject.

Riera says our role as parent is changing as your teenager becomes more independent. You are transitioning from being a parent to, if you navigate well, a consultant. It may not be what you expected but as your teen gains more and more independence, you will want to be an advisor. Your teen will be realizing she doesn't need, nor want, to be told what to do and she will listen less and less to being given the answers she now wants and needs to figure out on her own. Still, even the most independent of us want to consult with those we can trust and depend on. Your goal as a parent of a teenager is to be an important and influential advisor to your teen. How do you successfully move from parent to advisor? Start by understanding or remembering the needs of teenagers. Teenagers need to:

- Feel cared for and loved
- Believe they matter and are important to you
- Feel safe and not alone with their worries
- Learn how to tell what they feel and need
- Learn how to talk openly
- Engage when they are ready



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This last one may be familiar to you. Have you ever gone crazy because your teen won't talk when he comes home from school or at the dinner table but come 10 or 11 at night, he wants to get into deep conversations right when you can barely keep your eyes open? One of the hardest parts of communicating effectively with teens is being willing to listen when you least like to listen. If your teen sees that you care enough to listen when he is ready to talk, the more likely he will want you as a consultant.

This brings us to the topic of listening. Many of the conversations we have with younger children might be best described as "parent talks/child listens." This dynamic needs to change during adolescence to meet teenagers' needs. Teenagers need to be listened to more than talked at. One of the ways they learn for themselves is to hear themselves verbalize their own thoughts. Many teens learn a tremendous amount by hearing themselves speak their thoughts out loud. As parents, we must remember to avoid the temptation to be the expert or to be judgmental. Instead, we must give them

# ROOTS

STILL NOT THE BARK, TWIG OR LOG

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We are so lucky to have the counseling support we have at Redwood. Academic, social/emotional and college/career counselors provide students with support at school. We must work together to provide students the support they need to navigate the challenges of adolescence. We welcome your thoughts as we move forward. Send thoughts and comments to: [input@redwood.org](mailto:input@redwood.org). If you're interested in discussing this issue of Roots, visit and comment at my blog at [rhsprincipal.blogspot.com](http://rhsprincipal.blogspot.com)

the room to explore their own ideas and find their own solutions. It's why we often appreciate someone who truly listens to us. Teens are beginning to feel the same way. They want to think out loud with someone they trust who listens well. As parents, we've probably already built that trust so now we need to learn to listen to our teens better than we ever have before.

So, to sum up some suggestions on how to communicate well with your teenager....

- Become a consultant your teen wants to "hire."
- Be a good listener. You have given good advice for years. Let your teen repeat some of that good advice back to you as s/he learns it for themselves.
- Be patient and receptive when your teen wants to talk even if it's the least convenient time for you. A little discomfort now will have big payoff later as s/he becomes confident you are truly there for him/her.

Sounds easy, huh? It's never as easy as the experts make it sound but hopefully these reminders will help you remember these strategies.

## FURTHER READINGS

Below are some recommended readings on communicating with teens:

**Staying Connected to Your Teenager;** Mike Riera, De Capo Press, 2003

**Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers;** Mike Riera, Celestial Arts, 2005

**Adolescent Health Working Group;**  
<http://www.ahwg.net/knowledgebase/nodates.php?pid=80&tpid=4>

## MORE HINTS TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR TEEN

- Eat dinner together
- Show empathy
- Use good tone and word choice
- Listen for tone
- Watch body language
- Be ready for opinions you don't agree with
- Resist the urge to lecture or nag
- Ask questions - don't always give answers
- Don't evade tough questions – answer them
- Don't pretend you know all the answers
- Be a good role model in your communication

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## EVEN MORE HINTS TO EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR TEEN

- Take advantage of teachable moments
- Listen more than you talk
- Don't jump to conclusions
- Answer questions simply and directly
- Make sure your teen feels you respect her
- Reassure your teen they are normal
- Coach your children on how to get out of risky situations
- Discuss with your teen which other trusted adults are available when not comfortable talking to parents

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