

Talking to young people about tough issues

The intensity of today's life issues can be challenging for any adult, so discussing them with an adolescent can be even more complicated. Many parents feel inadequate talking through intimidating topics like sex, drug use, peer pressure, bullying and teen pregnancy. The following tips on communication, parental reactions and responsibilities can help you navigate conversations with a young person about the tough issues they could face:



Communication strategies

- **Treat individually** — Every child is unique and responds differently to tough issues. Consider where your teen feels most comfortable talking and expressing concerns and questions. For some teens, a chat in their bedroom works. Others might feel free to open up while riding in the car or out on a walk. Just remember that what works for one child may not for all.
- **Share facts** — Be sure to provide your child with helpful, accurate information. Do your research and don't make things up in an attempt to scare or overwhelm them. Share how to find quality information on the Internet and how to avoid false "facts."
- **Look for conversation starters** — Be on the lookout for ways to bring up a tough topic. Sometimes a television show or news story can be a great way to gauge how they're feeling about an issue. Watch their body language. Openly share your feelings in the conversation, too.
- **Have multiple talks** — Multiple conversations are best for difficult topics. Your teen might have more in-depth questions as they get older and experience things differently. Therefore, it's wise to not make tough issues a one-time conversation.



Parental reactions

- **Spare the lectures** — The goal is to have a conversation with mutual discussion. Lectures often scare teens and/or cause them to shut down emotionally. When they feel heard, they are more likely to listen.
- **Cut out distractions** — Make sure you are in the right state of mind to discuss a difficult topic. To truly hear your child's thoughts, eliminate as many distractions as possible. This means silencing your cell phone, turning off the television, and giving your child your undivided attention.
- **Don't assume** — You don't know what your teen does or doesn't know about a topic. They may have misconceptions about issues like sex or drug use. Quite possibly, they know much more than you think they should or would. Most importantly, if they do ask you a question, don't assume it means they're engaging in the behavior. They are coming to you in safety and trust, so making assumptions is a surefire way to jeopardize the relationship.

- **Stay calm** — When your teen sees you panicking and anxious about a situation, they're less likely to open up. Remain composed by listening and asking open-ended (not "yes" or "no") questions. Make sure your tone of voice doesn't sound accusatory.
- **Model healthy reactions** — Children are always watching us. They're looking to see how we react to difficult situations (i.e., a death, crisis, bad decision or another loss of some kind). Our actions will give them far more information than our conversations will.



Parental responsibilities

- **Share feelings and values** — Your teen knows you have opinions, emotions and values. It's important to explain why you feel how you do. If they know what's important to you, they'll be more likely to consider their own priorities when facing a tough situation.
- **See the big picture** — When discussing good choices, it's important to talk about what motivates that decision. Educate your teen about how making good choices allows us to lead good lives and meet our goals.
- **Do not criticize** — Occasionally, you may overhear your teen talking about another friend's questionable decisions. Be cautious not to criticize and jump to conclusions. Walk through the potential consequences of that behavior and listen to what your teen thinks about the situation.
- **Pay attention to media** — Raising adolescents in a media-saturated world also provides unique challenges. For example, more than 75% of prime-time programs show the excitement of sexual activity, while only 14% demonstrate the risks and responsibilities. It's important to be aware of what your teen's watching. Better yet, make some popcorn and share some screen time together. Showing interest in their likes is a great way to build bridges for communication.
- **Follow up** — Typically, today's teens do more of their talking via text than face-to-face or by phone. Consider sending your teens a positive text to follow-up after discussing a tough topic. There's no need to feel intimidated or try to be someone you're not. Simply text as you would talk. "Thanks for sharing your thoughts with me. Love you," is a great way to communicate your appreciation, attention and love. Finally, it's important to praise a teen when they are honest with you about tough issues. Help them understand that having a humble attitude and telling the truth will minimize a possible punishment. Remaining calm and nonjudgmental shows your child you're a safe place and an ally, and they will be more likely to approach you with tough topics in the future.



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