

BUILDING STRONG COMMUNICATION WITH YOUR ADOLESCENT

The adolescent years (ages 10 -18) are an amazing time for growth and development. You may have noticed your child developing new interests, taking new risks, or becoming more social. You may have also experienced that your child is less likely to share about their ups and downs with you.



This is totally normal. As children grow older, they are actually wired to focus more on independence and friends. And they're wired to want to do this work a bit more on their own.

Knowing that a trusted adult is there for them is **CRITICAL** to this development.

So, as that trusted adult, how do you...

- stay in the loop in a way that honors your child's independence?
- encourage them to share with you?
- set the stage for them to keep communicating?

YOU CAN BE THERE TO...

- listen
- offer comfort and support
- talk through decisions
- help create boundaries
- be a home base

**THESE 3 TIPS WILL HELP.**



TIP 1

BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

What is active listening?

Active listening means you're giving your child your full attention when they speak. It's listening not just to their words but their actions and emotions too. As they speak, you're not thinking about your response or advice you'll give. Instead, you're working to understand their perspective and remember what they say.

And active listening means you're working to demonstrate that you hear them. How? By asking open questions, acknowledging their feelings, and sharing back what you heard them say.

When you are an active listener, your child learns that their thoughts and feelings are important to you. Active listening creates a safe and supportive space for them to tell you about their ups and downs.

HERE ARE SOME DETAILS ON HOW TO DO IT:



Be fully present.

Set aside distractions like phones and computers. As best as you can, try to just concentrate on what your child is saying. Notice if you start daydreaming or thinking your own thoughts. If that happens, remind yourself to cue back into your child.



Notice more than just their words.

Adolescents communicate in lots of ways—with their tone, face, body. As they talk, pay attention to how they are moving and sitting. Are they talking quickly? Slowly? These things can give you clues into how they might be feeling.



Practice patience.

Adolescents can tell long tales about their day or their experiences. They may not always make sense. That's okay. Avoid interrupting and allow them to pause and think things through. It's okay if there are long silences. Your older child may just be processing their ideas. Giving them time to do this shows that you are engaged.



If you do chime in, do it with an open-ended question.

For example, you might say, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What did you think about that?" or "How did you feel when that happened?" Adolescents can be especially sensitive to feeling judged by others, so it's important that your questions feel genuinely curious.



Remain calm and curious.

It's totally normal to have reactions to what your child is saying, but they will be paying close attention to how you respond. It's important to manage your reactions as they share. As best you can, remain calm and curious. It can help to take some slow breaths if you start to feel yourself getting stressed or overwhelmed.



Share back what you hear.

After your child has spoken, tell them what you heard. For example, "What I heard you say is that you felt hurt when..." This lets them know you were really listening. It also helps them feel understood. You can also ask, "Did I get that right?" This gives them the chance to clear up any miscommunication.



Show understanding.

It's important that children know their feelings are valid. You can validate their feelings even if you don't agree with them. For example, after your child shares you might say, "I can understand why you felt angry in that moment," or "That sounds like a really challenging situation."



Ask if they'd like support.

Your child may have shared because they want your advice. Or maybe they shared because they just wanted to talk through something. After your child shares it's always okay to ask, "Do you want some help thinking it through together, or did you just want me to know about that?"



Follow up.

Some conversations happen in one sitting, but many are ongoing. For example if your child told you about something hard that happened at school, ask about it the next day. Try, "You told me about X yesterday, how did that turn out today?"



AND...

★ If there is ever a time you feel like your child's safety and well-being is at risk, it's always okay for YOU to reach out for support. You might speak with their pediatrician, guidance counselor, or mental health professional for help putting the right supports in place.

TIP 2

BE AVAILABLE

So, how do you get your child talking so that you can listen? The good news is that just doing everyday stuff together with your older child helps let them know that you're there for them. This lays the foundation for them to share when they're ready.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO TRY:

Spend time together even if you aren't talking. Just sharing the same space can be great. For example, your child can do homework at the table while you cook a meal.



Try being active together. This takes the pressure off "needing to talk" but gives your child the chance to chat if they want to. Play a game. Go for a walk. Doing something active can help adolescents process their experiences too!



Car rides and bus rides can also lead to great shared moments. Some older children have an easier time opening up when adults aren't looking directly at them. So, you might find your child talks more when you're looking ahead at the road and not at them.



AND...

- ★ Know that kids may not want to talk during these moments of "together time." That's okay. You're creating the space for them to share when they're ready. Remind them that you are there to listen when they want to talk. Look for cues that it might be a good time to check in, then ask, "Do you feel like talking?"

Do you feel like talking?

- ★ Kids may sometimes want to talk when you are not available. That's okay. Let them know that you can't talk at that moment and why. Then let them know a time when you'll be available. "I can't talk now because I'm finishing work. I'll be done in 20 minutes and will be able to give you my full attention then." Make sure to keep your word.



TIP 3

MAKE IT A ROUTINE

As children move through adolescence they will be more likely to talk with you about big stuff and hard stuff if they're in the habit of talking with you about little everyday stuff. When conversations just become a routine, you lay a foundation for great communication.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO TRY:

Ask them to share details from their day. Any detail is fine. You might give fun prompts like, "Let's both share one rose (good thing) and one thorn (hard thing) from our day."



Ask about their opinions. Ask what they think about current events. Get their opinion on a movie they think you should watch.



Ask about their passions and show genuine interest. Can they tell you about the game they watched on TV? A song they love? A book they can't put down?



Try using artifacts to spark conversation. Each week, you might make it a point to ask about something your child made or wrote.



Make it a routine to talk about feelings. A great way to do this is to share how you're feeling. "I'm feeling frustrated because I have to work late tonight."



The more communication and sharing becomes part of your daily routine, the more you might notice too. It's normal for adolescents to have ups and downs, but it's also important that you keep an eye out for signs that your child might be having powerful emotions.

FIRST

Look out for any big changes in your adolescent's behaviors or patterns.

- Have their sleeping patterns or appetite suddenly changed?
- Do they seem less patient? More irritable?
- Are they more quiet than usual? Less social? More antsy?

THEN

Mention what you see and ask about it.

- For example: "I notice you've been having trouble sleeping? Is there anything that's been on your mind? Anything bothering you? Making you feel worried?"

And remember, if you're concerned about your child's health, safety, or well-being, it's always okay to reach out for support.

