

Parenting Today's Teenager

Written by NCSA Administrator
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If you have a teenager in your life, you've probably done your share of worrying about the potential risks out there such as alcohol, tobacco or illicit drug use, dangerous driving and sexual activity.

You may also be worried that you're no longer the most influential force in your child's life. Teenagers face a host of challenges and changes in their lives and like to act as if they alone can deal with them. But the reality is that they need (and secretly want) your help and guidance. In fact, now that you have a teenager, your job as a parent isn't done, it's just different.

Remember when your children first learned to walk? They often searched for a table or your leg to steady themselves. Perhaps they panicked if they couldn't find something to hold onto. You made sure they were protected from things that could hurt them if they fell. You stayed close enough to help if they lost their balance but gave them enough room to practice their newfound skill. It was probably a joy for you to see them grow in confidence as they went from crawling to walking and from walking to running.

Adolescence is a lot like that. Teenagers need you close by during this time of exploration or they will find something else to hold on to, just like they did when they were toddlers. They need your help to navigate the barriers. And they need you close enough to openly ask questions and talk about problems, but far enough away so they can begin making decisions for themselves.

The common thread among teenagers who perform well academically and socially and stay healthy and drug-free is that they have a close relationship with their parent(s). These teens report that their parents are interested in them, in what they do and in who they know. They also say their parents are curious about their lives and their ideas. They feel connected, because their parents listen to them and take time to find out what's going on in their world.

This only makes sense. Teenagers who are close to their parents or a trusted adult caregiver have more at stake when it comes to decisions about risk-taking. At that moment of truth when they are confronted with a risky choice they don't want to disappoint their parents or betray their trust. In fact, if you are connected, supportive and responsive to your teenager, it will be much easier for you to take on the tougher parts of parenting, such as setting rules and discipline. Here are some ways to foster a close relationship with your teen:

- Spend time together regularly, doing things your teen enjoys.
- Talk openly and honestly.
- Use positive communication skills, especially when there is conflict. For example, think

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before you speak and acknowledge your teen's point-of-view so he or she knows you are listening.

- Acknowledge the positive qualities and behaviors of your teenager.

It's true that sometimes staying connected is easier said than done. How can you get your message through when your teenager may be resentful or argumentative? Remember that nearly all teenagers are working toward independence. They can't develop their own minds unless they challenge things you and others have taught them. So they will often argue just for the sake of disagreeing. It's their way of forming an identity. However, even when they are giving you a hard time, they are probably listening and remembering. So keep your messages brief, but don't stop talking and reaching out. Understand them by observing and respect them by listening.