

Break down barriers

6 tips for talking with your teen

By SHARON MACGREGOR

The moment the doctor, nurse or midwife hands you that precious baby is your first opportunity as a parent to start the lines of communication for the teen years. It may be difficult to imagine planning so far in advance, but as an experienced parent can tell you, no one magical event happens to warn you, "The teen years are here, get out the manual."

1. Start communicating early.

While your child is a toddler, he commands attention, and as good, doting parents we watch, mesmerized by our child's growing ability to communicate. We laugh as he struggles to find and pronounce words. We wait with bated breath as he stammers through a retelling of his favorite show or movie. Hold on to these feelings and your ability to engage this child in

communication and keep in mind that someday this child may answer "How was your day?" with a curt "Fine," as he storms off to his bedroom and slams the door.

If you are already in the preteen or full-blown adolescent years and feel the strain, do not fear or surrender. You can still make a few adjustments that may be enough to enable both you and your child to feel more comfortable and establish a better flow of communication.

Adolescence is a time of change and, much like the toddler years, there are biological as well as psychological growth spurts occurring. "Everything changes – biology, cognitive skills, social skills, the way teens look at things – all aspects of their lives change," says Paul Schwartz, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh.

"If we have an argument, I wait for her to calm down so we can talk about what happened, why it happened, and what we can do better next time."

**JULIE SEGER, MOM OF
MARINA MADDALENA,
AGE 14, OF NEW PALTZ**



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Denyse Variano, R.N. and senior extension resource educator/ community & parenting educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension in Middletown, agrees. "This time of brain development leads to [a teen's] highest level of cognitive thinking, reason, cause and effect. The teen is a great debater and has more stamina than an adult as well as a love for having the last word. Even if it is three hours later and through a locked bathroom door, they will try to have that last word to practice their new thinking skills."

2. Choose your battles.

The parent's role is multifaceted in establishing and maintaining communication. Decisions must be made about which issues are important to pursue (those affecting the safety and health of your teen) and which to drop (such as fashion opinions).

If you do not allow your child to make some decisions within a boundary, they will rebel in the same manner as the toddler who has a temper tantrum because she wants to wear her snow boots in the middle of July.

"If it is not an imminent health and safety issue, decide how much weight to give the issue at hand," says Dr. Schwartz. Successful parenting includes giving your child the illusion of choice. For a teen, deciding on a hairstyle or some other non-life threatening issue may be a decision she needs to make on her own.

However, as a parent you should know where your child is, with whom, what they are doing and when they will be home. The first way to obtain this information is to ask.

Second, do not allow your child to leave the house unless you have met their friends. "Honking in the driveway for my daughter to come out does not work in my house," states Dr. Schwartz.

Local series gives parents pointers

Cornell Cooperative Extension in Orange County offers a "Living with Your Teen: Enjoying and Surviving the Challenge" series twice a year. This series addresses the behavioral, developmental and emotional changes of families with pre-teens and young adolescents. Learn why teens act the way they do, how to talk with and relate to your teen, and strategies to keep kids safe. For information contact Suzan Sussman at 845-344-1234.

In keeping track of your teen's activities outside the home, Suzan Sussman, parenting coordinator at Cornell Cooperative Extension in Middletown and mom of three teens, says, "cell phones do help. In the past, the child had to step out of their activity to get in touch. Texting has allowed them privacy from peers. This allows your child to stay in touch without negative connotations and if the child has to change locations, they can let a parent know. Parents should be familiar with new technology."



Have advice on talking to teens? Share your tips at forums.hvparent.com/forums

3. Keep parental boundary lines clear.

Most teens have plenty of friends, but what they truly need is parental guidance.

"Peers are taking a central role in their lives, but I think that on the really hard issues – drugs, alcohol, and sexuality – children still rely on and want to have those conversations with parents or family first," says Denyse Variano.

She cautions parents to be careful in their approach. Don't be overly strict, but don't try to be your teen's best friend, either.

"If parents are not available or seem too critical or unduly alarmed, then they will go to peers. During the teen years parents try to become the friend –

we want to have wonderful friendly times, but the role is to guide, lead, and explain consequences. Use humor, have fun, be present, but maintain authority. Parents must be clear they are the authority figure."

"You cannot be your child's friend," adds Wendy Bender-Slesinski, owner of Merit Counseling in Pine Bush and mother of two pre-teen sons. "Being kind and gentle to open the lines of communication remains clearly different from friendship. With friendship, parents lose the ability to have boundaries, structure and authority."

4. Stay in touch every day.

If you are not speaking to your child about the everyday things in a comfortable, safe fashion, it will be that much harder for your child to share more serious concerns with you. The best conversations may occur about the serious subjects when you least expect them because your child feels secure.

"One of the best conversations I had with one of my own sons happened while we were gardening together," says Bender-Slesinski. "One question leads to another and before you know it, a serious topic has been addressed."

Spending quality time with your child as he is growing up can make a big difference. "The more time you spend with your teen and the more you are available to them,

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you increase the odds of having better communication. You may have one of your best discussions while washing the dishes together," says Variano.

Sometimes a little bit of humor can help a relationship that has dissolved into one-word replies from your teen. Stand-up comedy is not necessary, just enough levity to help smooth out a potentially bumpy road of discussion.

Dr. Schwartz says humor is an excellent technique, and Suzan Sussman agrees. "Keeping a sense of humor is very important. As a mother of 19- and 15-year-old sons, I have to reach for humor every now and then. When they least expect it, I have shouted out, 'Hey, did I ever tell you not to smoke cigarettes or do drugs? I don't want you to be able to say I never told you.' In one case, my son did tell me about a few of the kids at school who were getting into trouble for both smoking and drug use and we had a more substantial and serious discussion."

5. Don't give up or back down.

Dr. Schwartz mentions a book by Anthony E. Wolf, Ph.D. called *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall? A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager*; the title of this tome illustrates the mixed message teens often send. For example, a teen's language may say, "Get out, go away, leave me alone," but in reality they need their parents. It is important for parents to remember that they should not back off or shut down in the face of resistance.

"If an adolescent becomes prickly, the parent can check to see if they are being too critical, but they should remember they are the

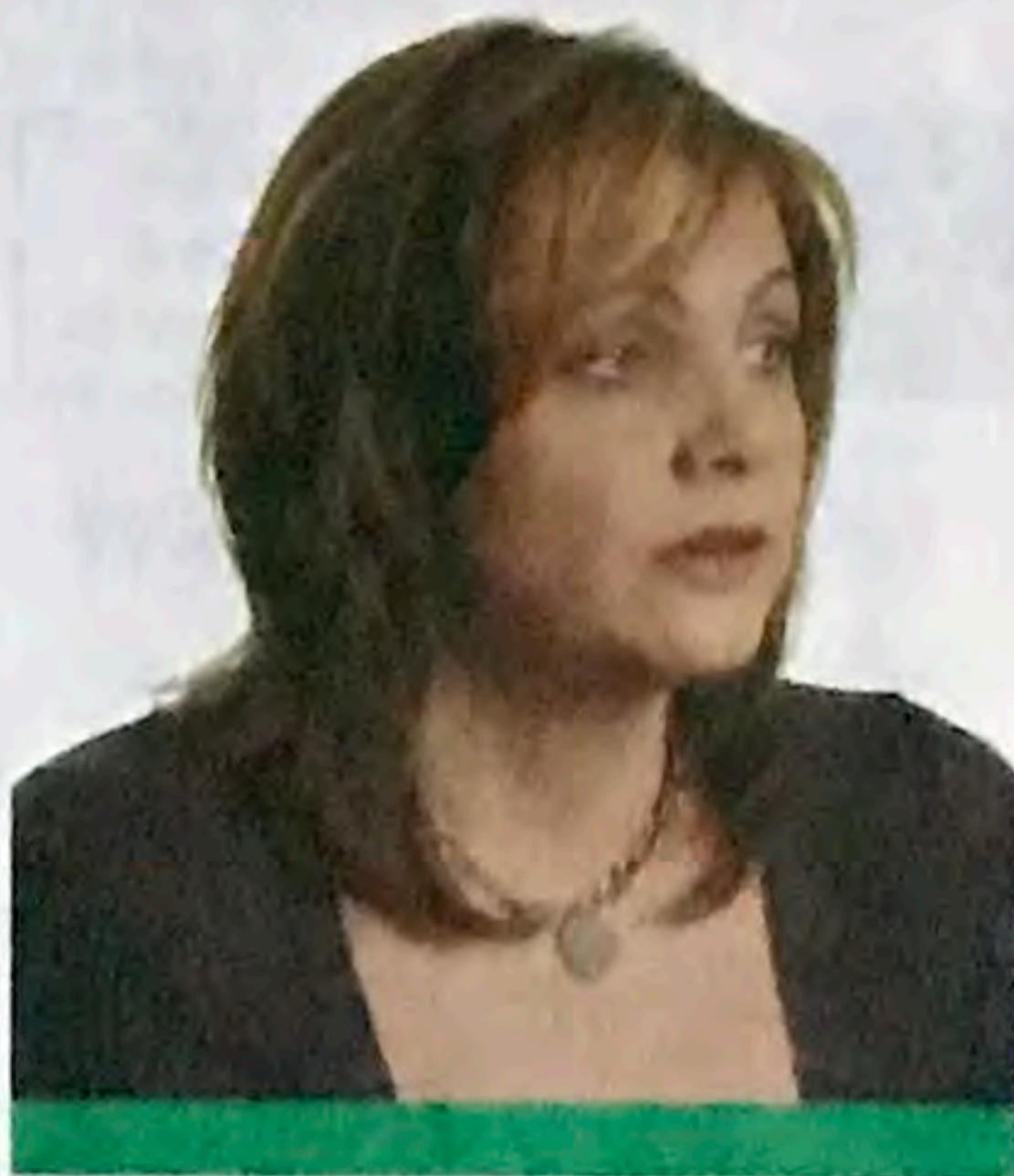
adult," says Dr. Schwartz.

"When a teen says, 'get out of my life' parents take it literally, but the child may only want space for that moment," explains Variano.

We all need a break now and then, especially after a bad day, but that does not mean you never revisit the subject or let the child rule the relationship. When a parent tries to reason with a toddler in the middle of a tantrum, it is easy to see the parent should walk away

"Sometimes I say 'I think this would work. It worked for me. Maybe you could try it.' I try to help my kids look at problems differently."

**JULIE SEGER, MOTHER OF 3,
NEW PALTZ**



and perhaps offer the child a time-out. This scenario is not as easily identified when our child is bigger and older. Remember to return to the issue once everyone is in a calmer, more rational state of mind.

At times, you may feel you are not given all the information. However, snooping in any form is not a way to communicate with your child. If you have a question, asking

will maintain trust and respect. Picking up a diary, going through dresser drawers and looking through a child's belongings are all forms of snooping.

"Checking your child's backpack probably ends with elementary school, although this depends on the individual child or if they have a particular circumstance that warrants this behavior from you," says Bender-Slesinski. "If you have concerns about computer activity and your child, you can place the computer in a family friendly location, in addition to having discussions about your individual concerns for your child while they are on-line."

6. Review your relationship.

Most places of employment offer employees an annual review. Managers feel this is a productive way to offer staff constructive criticism and future growth opportunities.

Parents, on the other hand, can only be evaluated by the success of our children. Bender-Slesinski says a parent can see their results "not in how a child behaves at home, but how they are out in the world."

For many of us, only time will tell. So, for today, start talking with your child now. Decide which issues are the most important to you and your family. Maintain your position as the authority figure, not as another friend or confidant for your child.

Allow some time and space for your child to think, but do not walk away or back down from difficult issues. Take a look at the work you have done to date and decide what has worked and areas where you may be able to improve. Check out local parenting seminars, stay current with the technology your child is able to use and keep up the good work!

Sharon MacGregor is the mother of two teen boys in Orange County.