

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

Why Parent-Teen Communications Often Fall Short

from the American Counseling Association

As a parent you want to be there for your teenager. You try to learn what's happening in his or her life and try to help with problems or uncertainties he or she may be facing.

But despite your best efforts, most of the time you are rebuffed. Responses ranging from stony silence to outright hostility leave you wondering how you have failed so miserably in connecting with your own child.

The problem, however, may not be your fault but just the simple fact that parent-teen communications are inherently complicated.

One reason is simply that it's not easy to be a teenager. There's a variety of unsettling biological, psychological and emotional changes that are all part of a teen's normal developmental process. Pile on top of that the pressures of school, extracurricular activities, maybe a part-time job, and then the anxiety of college or a career in the near future, and it becomes easier to understand why the open communication you enjoyed with your pre-teen has become much more challenging.

Teenagers may often feel that their parents just can't understand all the changes and pressures they are facing. These feelings may be reinforced when parents react negatively to teens seeking to separate more from their parents and be more independent.

While we all want our children to grow up and be responsible adults, it can be confusing to deal with as our teens take their first tentative steps in that direction. This same process is also hard on the teen's side. He or she is anxious about sharing feelings of insecurity or uncertainty, about admitting mistakes, since it will just make him or her look weak, immature and not ready for the freedoms so badly desired.

There is no quick fix for any of these communication issues, but it's important not to give up on the effort. While many of your communication attempts will likely seem inadequate, every now and then you will break through and have a meaningful discussion. As importantly, your attempts to stay connected are active demonstrations of your love and concern.

Look for opportunities to let your teens know you're trying to understand and sympathize with all they are facing. Offer positive feedback when it's deserved and let them know your trust and respect is being earned. It takes work to open up communication, but it is worth the effort.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACACorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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