

Communicating with young teenagers

Many parents who enjoy good communication with their children are shocked when their previously chatty and friendly son turns into a grunting incommunicado, or their affectionate daughter begins to slam doors and prefers to be alone in her bedroom than go on outings with the family.

The first thing to say is – of course – that this doesn't happen in all families. Some children sail through puberty fully functioning and this transitional period is less noticeable! But it's rare for there not to be any problems whatsoever. So, if this is facing you (or may be about to face you), what can you do about it?

Keep talking

Communication is critical, even though sometimes it may seem as though you're the one doing the talking, and what you say is hitting a brick wall. But even then, try not to nag – just put across what you want to say and then give your child a chance to digest it. And when your child is in the mood to talk – listen! You may find you need to listen hard, to hear what is not being said as well as what is actually being said.

Start to let go

Sometimes parents are frightened of letting their children have more independence, for fear of all the dangers 'out there'. But when they hit puberty, children are starting to grow up, and they need to be allowed to do more on their own. Rows can occur as a result of parents not allowing their child to do things that others are doing, so do consider giving them a little more leeway. You don't have to do it all at once! – it can be done in stages so you can loosen the ties slowly (such as letting them travel to a venue alone then picking them up afterwards; the next time, picking them up an hour later; and finally, letting them travel home alone).

At the same time, don't believe every assertion of 'everyone else's parents let them...' This is a claim heard only too often in every house in the country, and sometimes has no relation to the facts. You know your child best, so make your own judgements in each case. Compromise, set boundaries, and make sure your child knows where those boundaries lie.

It will make things easier for you if you ensure your child goes out with some money and with a mobile phone (that has a charged-up battery!). And always make sure you know where they're going and who with.

Settling arguments

If they're not addressed, arguments can go on and on, with resentments simmering under the surface for weeks. Try to dispel rows before they get out of hand.

If something has been done that has made you very angry, it may be best to say that you feel that way, and that the conversation about the issue will take place later when you've cooled down. That way, you're less likely to shout or to say things you'll later regret.

Remember that there are times when your child is in the right, so make sure you listen actively to their 'side', and be ready to admit it when you're wrong. Your child will respect you for that, and will learn from it too. It may mean that next time, s/he will be ready to admit to being in the wrong too.

Give them space

It really isn't such a bad thing for a child to shut themselves away in their bedroom. It may not be what they used to do last month or last year, but it's normal and natural for them to want 'alone' time. Try to ensure they come down to eat with the rest of the family at least.

If, however, you find they are shutting themselves in their rooms almost permanently, you may need to intervene – even to the point of insisting that they come down to eat with the family, watch TV with you on some evenings, or visit grandparents and friends. Reassure them that you want their company (even when you privately feel that their company at the moment isn't very pleasant!).

Don't be embarrassing

If you have to discuss an aspect of their behaviour with your child, never do it in front of others, especially their friends. Similarly, if you have to tell them to be home at a certain time, never say anything along the lines of 'Remember to be back for bedtime'. They will curl up with embarrassment because their friend has heard that they have a 'bedtime'!

Neither will your child want you to be funny or witty in front of their friends. You may find yourself funny or witty, but the chances are they won't. If in doubt: when their friends are at your house – let them be!

Many books have been written on the subject of the young teenage child and his/her parent – there are sections on parenting in any bookshop. So dip into several books and find out what suits you. Among the huge variety you might like to consider 'How to Succeed as a Parent' by Steve Chalke (Hodder & Stoughton) or 'Parenting' by Annie Ashworth, Meg Sanders and Karen Dolby (Orion).

Mothers' Union members around the UK and Ireland are now running parenting groups, and some of these are aimed at the parents of teenagers. For more information contact Mothers' Union in your area of Mothers' Union headquarters in London.

And keep an eye on this website for future 'teen' articles, which will cover issues such as parties, alcohol, smoking, health worries, education and money.