

Seven Tips for Parents of Teens: Healthy Communication

by Dr. Pam Monday

1. Build Trust by Treating Your Teen With Respect.

Ask, rather than demand. Value their ideas, even if you don't agree. Praise effort. Tell them you love them. Talk to them with a respectful tone of voice. Ask if they want your advice before you start giving it. Respect and establish boundaries – physical and emotional. Lecture less; listen more. Aim for a 5:1 ratio of positives to negatives.

2. Learn Healthy Parenting Skills.

Take a parenting class, read a parenting book, like "Help Me! I Have a Teenager!" by Annie Drake. Be clear about what your rules are; write them down. Establish clear, consistent consequences for breaking the rules, and enforce them! Teens need limits; they learn how to be responsible adults by learning how to follow rules and doing age-appropriate chores. Too much freedom, lack of structure and rules, or inconsistent enforcement of consequences enables irresponsible behavior.

3. Control Your Reactivity.

Children learn by example and by making mistakes. When they make mistakes, set a good example for them by not losing your temper, judging, criticizing, shaming, moralizing, blaming, humiliating, making fun of, lecturing, putting down or guilt-tripping! Stay calm! If you are unable to be calm, excuse yourself until you are back in control of yourself and can talk calmly. Children respect a parent who is respectfully in charge, and is centered and calm.

4. Listen to Your Child's Point of View.

Listen to understand the feelings behind the words. Validate their perspective even if you don't agree. Empathize with the feelings. Don't use the "shoot/reload" method of communication that only escalates defensiveness. Respect your child's right to have an opinion; remember, they do not have an adult's resources, knowledge or life experience with which to address problems – that's why they need your guidance. Don't alienate them.

5. Allow Your Teen to Have All of Their Feelings.

Help them express appropriately anger, sadness, fear, hurt, inadequacy. Stuffing feelings creates enormous problems in life.

6. Model the Kinds of Behaviors You Want to See Your Child Do.

Do you take responsibility for the mistakes you make (can you say "I'm sorry" or "I made a mistake"?) Do you keep the standards and value you want them to have? Do you talk to them and your spouse with respect? Do you find ways to grow and change? Be the kind of person you want your teen to become. Create happiness in your life to show them adulthood can be fun!.

7. Have a Healthy, Loving Relationship With Your Spouse.

Adolescents often act up to take the focus off the real problem – the troubled marriage. Don't deny marital problems; the children will be the casualties. Get help if needed!