

The Right Way for Parents to Question Their Teenagers

Research shows that when communication breaks down, the mental health of adolescents can suffer

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Any parent of a teenager knows that it can be a struggle to get them to open up. It's natural for adolescents to pull away from their parents as they begin to build their own identities and test their burgeoning independence. But a growing body of research finds that maintaining open communication with adolescents is crucial to their mental health and well-being. Teens who disclose their daily activities and inner feelings to a parent tend to have lower levels of anxiety and depression and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.

How should parents handle these years? Researchers point to a number of things they can do to increase the odds that their teens will confide in them—as well as behaviors to avoid because they can inhibit conversation.

“Even as teens expand their social network, parents need to know that they still remain their child's primary source of support,” says Ashley Ebbert of Arizona State University. In a study published last month in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*, Ms. Ebbert, along with her co-authors, Drs. Frank Infurna and Suniya Luthar, found that when a teen views parents as disengaged, it can lead to a breakdown of trust and communication and have a negative impact on teens' mental health.

The team used data from 262 adolescents taken from Dr. Luthar's New England Study of Suburban Youth (NESSY), a longitudinal study of adolescents in high-achieving schools. Every year from sixth grade through their senior year, students filled out questionnaires that evaluated their feelings of alienation from each parent (“I don't get much attention from my mother/father”), levels of trust (“My mother/father accepts me as I am”) and communication (“My mother/father can tell when I'm upset about something”), as well as depressive symptoms and anxiety.

The researchers found that teens who reported feeling increasing alienation and decreasing trust with their mothers, in particular, went on to have higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. “It's critical for parents to find a way to push past some of the walls that adolescents put up in order to maintain open communication and feelings of trust and support, while still respecting their space,” says Ms. Ebbert.

Adolescents usually tell their parents less about themselves as they get older, so the authors of a paper published in the journal *Emotion* in August looked at what parents can do to encourage

older teens to talk. Researchers recruited 50 adolescents and their mothers to discuss a topic that they argue about frequently, such as their choice of friends. The researchers observed and recorded the emotions that the mothers expressed, noting if they were critical and angry or interested and validating.

The most effective ways to get teens to open up, the researchers found, may depend on their age. Older adolescents, ages 17-18, were quicker to make emotional disclosures in conversations where mothers were highly validating. Surprisingly, however, they were also more likely to open up when mothers expressed negative emotions than when they simply remained neutral. Perhaps older teens are better equipped to handle a wider range of maternal emotions or “just want to know that their parents care,” hypothesizes lead researcher Alexandra Main of the University of California, Merced.

Past research finds that younger adolescents, ages 13-14, report being less likely to disclose personal information to their parents if they seemed preoccupied, distrusting, dismissive or prone to emotional outbursts. However, when parents were accessible and calm, gave good advice and offered reciprocal disclosures about their own lives, these teens reported being more apt to talk.

“The parents who know the most and who have the most influence over their child’s academics and behaviors aren’t the ones who ask lots of questions. They are often the ones who are the least reactive and who express warm, unconditional love and support,” says Kenneth Ginsburg, co-founder of the Center for Parent and Teen Communication at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. “Unconditionality means: ‘I understand what you’re going through, I’m not going anywhere, and you’re OK just the way you are,’” he says.

But this doesn’t mean unconditional acceptance of risky behaviors. Dr. Ginsburg points to research showing that there are three realms in which children expect parents to get involved: safety, morality and social rules. “In these areas, teens expect parents to communicate concern, set appropriate boundaries and have high expectations,” he says.

Maintaining a strong parent-child bond does more than keep teens safe during those critical years. “It models what healthy relationships look like,” adds Dr. Ginsburg, “and teaches teens how to successfully navigate relationships with their peers and their own families in the years to come.”