

How to Connect with Your Teens

Forget the long lectures and scheduled meetings when it comes to bonding with your child. "Preteens and teens need their parents as much, if not more, than they did when they were younger," says Michael Riera, PhD, author of *Staying Connected to Your Teenager* (De Capo Press). "But they hate anything that smacks of 'let's sit down and talk.' So you've got to be creative." Use these tips from real parents for staying close with your kid. If you can do as they do, you might just find there will be a whole lot more talking going on in your family.

By Nancy Kalish

Linked-In Move #1: Sneak Up from the Side

"I used to ask John, my 15-year-old, all types of questions and just get a shrug," says Jackie Ghosen, from Buffalo, New York. "Then one day we took a walk together and the answers came rolling out. So I try to create opportunities to 'side talk.' I'll help him stuff inserts in his newspapers for his paper route or have him help me fold towels."

Why It Works

Most teens are like John, says Riera. "Sitting straight across from kids and insisting on eye contact makes them feel judged and self-conscious," he explains. "But being able to look straight ahead at nothing gives them a comfort zone."

Linked-In Move #2: Go to the IM and the Text

"My girls love to chat online, even though I'm right in the next room," says Peggy Kriegel, a mother of 15-year-old twin daughters and a 4-year-old son, from Braselton, Georgia. "I'll IM something silly to one of the girls, and we'll go back and forth, and then when I ask how school was, I'll get more than a one-word answer. She'll write about a boy she likes who said something mean, and seem interested and open when I type back, 'Give him some space.'"

Why It Works

You're communicating on her terms, in her language. "If you're not sure what you're doing, all the better," says Lisa Boesky, PhD, author of *When to Worry* (Amacom Books). "Ask your teen to teach you texting shortcuts, for example." And if your child is on a social networking site, have her give you a tour now and then. She may spill details you'd never hear otherwise.

Linked-In Move #3: Help Others Together

"Sam loves to argue," says Deborah Lindner of Salt Lake City about her 15-year-old son. "But our whole family is crazy about dogs, so when my husband and I suggested we all volunteer at the Humane Society of Utah, there were no disagreements."

Why It Works

Besides building family pride through altruism, volunteering is a way for you to give your teen positive feedback—a huge opportunity if you've been criticizing him a lot lately. The key to success is coming up with something everybody is interested in. Find ideas at thevolunteerfamily.org or in *The Busy Family's Guide to Volunteering* by Jenny Friedman (Robins Lane Press).

Linked-In Move #4: Share Their Passions

"Coleman, my 16-year-old, loves to talk about anything involving a ball," says Jody Grant-Gray of Santa Monica, California. "So I read his sports magazines, then ask him about the articles. I can tell he appreciates that I'm trying to learn." Jody also spends weekends watching football with her son and husband. "Sometimes I'll pay bills or read," she says, "but I'm right there when he says, 'Mom, you have to see this!'"

Why It Works

Sharing his interest shows him special respect. "You're giving the message, 'I'm intrigued with you as a person,'" says Ralph I. Lopez, MD, clinical professor of pediatrics at New York City's Weill Cornell Medical Center. Don't worry if your kid acts lukewarm when you ask to play his new video game. His "whatever" really means "yes," says Riera. "He's just testing to make sure you're not faking it."

Linked-In Move #5: Schedule "Date Nights"

"At least once a month I insist on some one-on-one time with my kids," says Warren Augenstein, a dad from Houston. "I'll take my 11-year-old daughter to a play or a gallery opening, something her 14-year-old brother probably wouldn't enjoy. His favorite outing is a local high school ball game, so that's what we do."

Why It Works

Three little words: All your attention. "Kids never outgrow the need to have your focus on them, at least for an evening," says Dr. Lopez. But remember that you're there to have fun, so keep the talk light. There's nothing like a lecture on homework habits to ruin an outing.

Linked-In Move #6: Be There at Bedtime

"Both my boys like to check in with me at the end of the day," says Lauren Mayer of San Mateo, California. "Ben, my 14-year-old, likes to talk about the next day's agenda, or something philosophical. His brother, David, who's 17, is a theater kid and he takes a lot of dance classes, so I'll give him a back rub. As he relaxes, he opens up."

Why It Works

Even when kids are big, their defenses go down when they're tired, says Riera. And there's probably less competition for their attention when the house is quiet. They've also had a chance to reflect on their day—and may even be willing to tell you how they're feeling.

Necessary Business

You've found pot in your son's room or discovered that your daughter has been skipping school. Now you have to talk. How can you get your teen to open up—and listen to what you need to say? Try this advice.

Give yourself time to prepare.

Unless your child is in immediate danger, take a few hours to calm down and think. Also hold off if your teen comes home drunk or high. You can't accomplish anything until he's sober. If you have a spouse, discuss your views and agree on the consequences ahead of time. Then talk with your teen away from sibs and when there's not a big test the next day.

Keep it simple.

Focus on what you heard, saw, or have in your hand. Say, "I found this pot in your room. Can you tell me about it?" State your concerns clearly and directly, as in, "The school secretary said you weren't there today. What's going on?" Stay away from accusatory statements (as in, "You are ruining your life!"), which only make people defensive. Instead, use "I" statements like, "I'm worried that your grades have been slipping." Then listen.

Be willing to hear the truth.

If your child gives an honest answer that's startling, try not to panic, judge, or get angry. Otherwise, you're likely to hear, "I didn't tell you because I knew you'd freak out!"

Don't drag it out.

If your child admits to wrongdoing, state your objections succinctly, as in, "Using pot is illegal and dangerous. I care about you and won't accept this behavior." Then be ready with a consequence. If he refuses to explain, calmly state, "I really want to hear what you have to say. But if you won't tell me, I can only assume the pot is yours." Then state what he has to do to regain your trust. Finally, remind him you're there if he needs you and try again in a few days. If he still won't open up, find another adult with whom he feels more comfortable. Of course, if it looks like your child has a drug or other mental health problem, consult his doctor.

Plugged-In Parent

The talk will flow if you use these four basic strategies.

- 1. Skip the lecture.** You have about 60 seconds before your teen tunes you out.
- 2. Keep your ears open.** Be what Ralph I. Lopez, MD, calls "tellable." That means consistently listening calmly without jumping in with judgmental comments. Instead, prompt him with short questions that show you're interested, such as, "So how did that make you feel?" Or, "Why do you think she said that?"
- 3. Watch your body language.** Are your arms crossed? You could seem angry even if you're not, says Lisa Boesky, PhD. And don't stand over her when she's sitting or put your hands on your hips. Both feel overbearing.
- 4. Hang on to family meals.** Sure, everyone is busy. But kids who can count on regular sit-downs are less likely to get into trouble and more likely to do well in school. Besides, your child wants your company.

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