

Communities that Care | Parents can listen for cues to engage teen in conversation

By Amelia McGinnis

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In today's age of social media, texting and tweeting, it can feel overwhelming for parents to figure out how to keep up. This becomes even more important as children become teenagers and the inevitable shift from hanging out to dating becomes a reality. Parents often don't know where to start or how to talk to their teen about relationships. These conversations do not have to be as hard as we make them, yet fear or naivety often keep parents from acting at all, which creates situations where teens are navigating this terrain on their own with only advice from peers who can be just as uninformed.

Talking to teens about healthy relationships need not be scary or overwhelming. Teens provide parents daily with opportunities for discussions, parents just need to be open and willing to listen. When your child comes home and starts talking about the newest details of their social world, you need to be willing to listen. All too often, parents hear concerns of their teen and jump quickly to problem solving, dismissing or lecturing. When a teen talk about a friend's relationship problems, parents might unwittingly shut down a conversation by saying something that may feel like judgment toward that friend. Practicing empathy and openness is key.

Empathy is not sympathy, nor is it condoning negative behaviors. Conversations should start with empathy, follow by asking questions, and then end by sharing values and beliefs.

So, what does that look like? Start with statements such as "Wow, that must have been hard" or "That sounds really complicated and I could see how they/you would be so upset." From there, ask more questions about what happened, how they dealt with it, what your teen's thoughts and feelings are about the matter. Look for opportunities to share your beliefs and values: "It worries me that he seems to be so jealous and protective of her. I don't think that's how a positive relationship should look. What do you think?"

These conversations should come up regularly in everyday dialogue. If we are open and interested in our teen's daily life, we will have conversations about friends and what is going on.

Know your children's friends. Talk to their parents. Know what their parent's values are. Know what TV shows your children watch and try to watch them together. Today's shows that target teenagers are great conversation starters about relationships and values. These conversations should be started early. If we wait until our children are already in relationships to have these conversations, we may be too late.

If you feel disconnected to your teen and daily conversations aren't happening enough, there are things you can do. Become knowledgeable about the new ways in which teens communicate.

Use social media and texting to your advantage. Create rules in the house about disconnecting from media during dinner or after a certain time at night. Be creative and know that parents don't always get it right, but it's the trying that shows that you care.

Amelia McGinnis is a licensed clinical social worker practicing at Individual and Family CHOICES Program. This weekly column is a collaboration of Centre County Communities that Care serving Bald Eagle, Bellefonte, Penns Valley and Philipsburg-Osceola area school districts, and Care Partnership: Centre Region Communities that Care serving the State College Area School District.

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