

Having Difficult Conversations with Teens

- Appropriate Timing
 - Have difficult conversations before there is conflict
 - Difficult conversations should always happen when emotions are calm
 - Avoid “emotional triggers” and past arguments – focus on the future
 - Be okay with placing the conversation on pause and continuing at a later date
- Establish Care
 - Explain why you are concerned
 - Express your feelings and needs as a parent through “I Statements”
 - “I fear losing you and I want to know that you are safe;”
 - “I feel disconnected. Open communication will help us to trust one another;”
 - “I worry about sexual assaults and I need to know that you are with a group of people;”
 - “I worry about peer pressure to drink, and I want you to feel empowered to say no.”
 - Remind your child how much you love them and respect their desire for autonomy
- Establish Limits
 - Clearly express what is expected and why (tying this into your needs as a parent is often effective)
 - “Curfew is 12:00 AM as I worry about your safety, and I am unable to sleep until you come home;”
 - “I would like for you to text me if you are going to be late as I irrationally worry if I don't know where you are;”
 - “Drinking and driving is not an option. I am scared about your safety and the safety of others.”
 - Establish Reasonable Consequences
 - Consequences should fit the infraction
 - Consequences should be clear, enforceable, and unequivocal. (“You will lose the ability to go out next weekend if you are past curfew as we need to have consequences for trust to be established.”)
 - Consequences must be meted out when limits are broken
 - If possible, consequences should be designed in collaboration with your teen and should address the harm (or potential harm) created. Feel free to ask your teen what appropriate consequences should be.

- Be Open to Dialogue
 - There are some non-negotiables in parent-child relationships. Be sure to clearly communicate these. (“You can never ride in a car with someone who has been drinking;” “You must never hurt someone physically or emotionally.”)
 - Communicate your “negotiable” decisions
 - Curfew time
 - How often to text where they are
 - Who they spend time with
 - Allow your negotiable decisions to be made in collaboration with the teen if possible. (For example, curfew at 11:00 PM on the weekends; unless the teen is at a movie.)
 - The more contributions that the teen has in establishing limits, the more likely the teen is to agreeably follow the limits
 - As new decisions need to be made, revisit your limits
- Record your Agreements
 - It seems silly, but posting your agreements on the refrigerator or a whiteboard legitimizes and publicizes your decisions and clarifies expectations
- Exit Strategies
 - Sometimes teens will find themselves in dangerous situations. Establishing that you will still love your children even if they find themselves in a precarious situation and creating a viable exit strategy could help to foster more trust and communication.
 - Questions parents can pose include:
 - Which adults or friends can you rely on to help you if you are in need?
 - What is your “exit strategy” if you were to need one?
 - What kind of response do you think you would get from me if you called and needed my help?
- Thank Your Teen for Communicating and Maintaining a Healthy Relationship with the Family
 - Celebrate with ice cream!