

Trust, communication, bonding: The parent-teen relationship (part one)

What's more delicate than a Fabergé egg? The parent-teenager relationship.

"Teenagers are working toward independence. That's the good part. The hard part is that means they lean more toward their peer relationships," says Sara Bennett, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare. "It can leave parents feeling like they're drifting apart. It can make parents feel like they're not very important. And it can make the teenagers a little moodier. They might be taking risks they weren't once taking. They might find peer relationships that are not very positive.

"All of that can feel really challenging for parents to navigate when it feels like your child is slipping through your fingers," Bennett adds.

Never fear, mom, dad and other caregivers. Bennett has a checklist to foster some years filled with respect, trustworthiness and positivity.

- Find shared experiences. Bennett points out that parents have no problem bonding with young kids. The youngsters want to play with mom and dad all the time. As kids get older, they are more often out of the house and exploring new interests.

"With teenagers, parents tend to focus on the things that they deem important. How'd you do on your math test? How is your relationship with Susie?" Bennett says. "Those are great, and they need to be talked about. But we also need to spend time just doing things we enjoy with each other. Focus on trivial or unimportant things."

Try these with your teen: game night, a family dinner or a round of mini golf.

"Just something to truly enjoy each other and stay connected in a fun way," Bennett says. And it's a time to talk about anything and everything that's going on with the child. Just make sure it's an activity the teen wants to do and the parent can tolerate for a couple hours, not the other way around.

- Build communication skills. Bennett advises keeping the conversations consistent and light. Try asking: what's the goofiest thing that happened at school today?

"Connect with them on the things that matter to them. Then when the things that come up that are important to talk about, you can do that," Bennett suggests. "When you do talk to them about the big, important things, ask them how it's going. Leave it open-ended, validate their feelings and stay engaged and connected with them. Really try to hear what they're saying. And before we decide to dive in and give them any constructive tips or problem solve for them, ask them if they would like help. Try to create some forethought and perspective instead of telling them what they should do."

Examples of open-ended questions on tough topics: What are kids doing with drugs these days? Are your friends drinking on the weekends? What do you think about that? If you're ever in that situation, are you going to get in a car with someone who's been drinking? What would your coach think of you doing that?

Verbiage to avoid: You're going to be in big trouble if you come home tonight and I find out you've been drinking.

Learn more

Read more about [mental health resources](#) available at OSF that can help build good family dynamics. Some resources, like [behavioral health navigators](#) and [support groups](#) at hospitals like the one Bennett works at, are available even if you are not an OSF patient.