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

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.

- Build trust with your teen. Two things for parents to consider here: have clear and concise expectations, and be consistent with your reactions.

  For example, if you let your child spend the night with their friend Matt one weekend but not the next, that could breed some confusion and resentment.

  "We want to create foresight and perspective so when they are out of our house and on their own making decisions, they can walk logically to make a great space for themselves," Bennett says.

  Bennett says if your teen meets your expectations, you can reward them. Some rewards are inherent, she says. If the youngster gets good grades or calls dad to say they're going to be late, that means less harping by the parents. But other rewards could include an allowance or treating them to dinner at their favorite restaurant.

- Know that advice and parenting strategies will change with age. Handling a 13-year-old is different than handling a 17-or 18-year-old, Bennett says with a smile.

  "You start at 13 having more responsibility. Parents open the dialogue and talk about forgiveness, collaboration and developing that perspective. Then maybe by the time they're 17, they don't need a whole lot of parenting in that way," Bennett says. "So maybe a 13-year-old still needs an 11 o'clock bedtime. But by the time they're 17, they can really navigate their own bedtime. They know when they're tired. They know when they have work to do. They know when wrestling practice is. Parents can just follow through and make sure they're staying on track."

- Give yourself grace. Bennett reminds you that parenting is tough, and there are a lot of people – family, friends and influencers – who try to tell you how to do it. Find what works for your family. Try hard, but cut yourself some slack when things aren't perfect.

  "We all get on ourselves. We have a lot of parent guilt. But when you are loving your kids and putting time into them, the things you do wrong are just part of being a human being. There's nothing to feel guilty about, and your kids know that," Bennett reassures. "In fact, I think parents and kids learn the most when they've both made mistakes and can find their way through."

  For example, don't be afraid to say something like: I was really mad this morning, and maybe I said things I shouldn't have. I'd like to revisit this and do this a different way because I think we both deserve a different

outcome. That teaches good conflict resolution, Bennett says.

Or, ask: what can I do for you? What do you want from this situation? Remember that teenagers are experts on issues in their own life, and an adult won't be able to solve all their problems. Sometimes, Bennett says, kids just want to vent.

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.