



ninety-nine tips for talking with your teenager

The Peninsula's top mental health professionals share their expertise.



Adolescent Counseling Services

welcome

For many parents, adolescence brings one of the most baffling experiences of raising a child. What turns a chatty eleven-year-old into a tongue-tied adolescent in the space of a few months?

We believe this guidebook can help you keep talking with your child by offering practical, concrete tips in an easy-to-read booklet. These tips were written by local therapists skilled in helping parents of young people ages eleven to nineteen years old.

Read through these tips and pick out two or three to try. Then try a few more. Some will work better than others. Every family and teenager is different, so don't give up. Keep trying.

Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS) is committed to helping teenagers find their way. If you know of a child in need of counseling, please contact us. Visit our website, www.acs-teens.org, or call us at 650-424-0852 for additional information and lists of important resources for your family and your child.

Sincerely yours,



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Executive Director
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“The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.”

~Dorothy Nevill

1. When you see your teen at the end of her day, don't let the first thing you ask about be homework.



2. Handle your own upsets responsibly. If you suddenly have blazing feelings about what your son or daughter is telling you, make an effort not to blurt them out. If you can't listen any more, just say so. Find some listening time for yourself with another adult so the heat of your feelings can be released without frightening your teenager.¹

1

3. Listen, love and don't judge.



4. Listen and then listen some more.

Try not to solve your teen's issue or conflict of the day. Rather, give your child a chance to air the issue and then acknowledge the difficulty of the dilemma.

5. Bite your tongue—think before speaking and always remember what you say can't be taken back.



6. Try to find a way to be present and available without hovering or intruding. Read the newspaper or do paperwork of your own nearby when your teen is doing homework.

“The quickest way for a parent to get a child's attention is to sit down and look comfortable.”

~Lane Olinhouse

8. Your teenager will talk to you when he feels safe, not when it's convenient. It's up to you to notice when your child's thoughts begin to string together. Be ready to drop your plans whenever that happens. It may help to go through the motions of being busy (fixing lunch, sorting clothes), but your attention must move from getting things done to listening.¹

7. When you initiate an important dialogue with your child, make sure that she is actually listening. Here are three ways to ensure that your child is ready to listen.

- 1) **Physical touch.** Touch your child on the arm to draw attention to you while you talk.
- 2) **Tone of voice.** Adults often use a raised voice and speak with a sharper edge when expecting conflict. When kids hear that voice, they stop listening and respond defensively.
- 3) **Right time to talk.** Notice when they are most responsive: morning, end of the day, sometime in between? After or during meal times? Do they need time to unwind after school?



9. Time, time, time—your teen wants you! Try to give your teen some of your undivided attention—no phone, cooking, email, etc.

The best substitute for experience is being sixteen.

~Raymond Duncan

10. If they are not coming to you with their problems they are going to their friends. The wisdom of two teenagers does not add up to adult wisdom. Ultimately your knowledge and wisdom comes from what you have done well and not so well, in your own life.

11. Be honest and realistic with your teen about knowing that she and her friends will be exposed to high-risk situations.

*12. Try to accept and respect,
not judge or criticize,
a teenager's feelings.*

13. Turn the tables around. See your teen as the expert with all the answers. Admit you're in the dark and don't have a clue.

14. Keep your sense of humor! Remember that this phase will pass, and that nobody stays 16 forever. Laughing together is a great icebreaker!

When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around.

But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.

~Mark Twain

16. Rather than asking your teen about his day, tell your teen about something that happened in your day.



17. Once in awhile, stay up late with your teenager.

The adolescent brain kicks in late at night, and teens will actually talk if you can make yourself available at midnight!

15. You are still the most important influence in your teen's life. Find ways to transmit your values to your child without lecturing: make comments on a TV show, share a news article, discuss a dilemma you had at work and ask advice. Have these discussions as conversations, not lectures. Seek your teen's input.



18. Share current news stories as an entry into discussions about relevant teen topics such as good driving, safety issues, substance abuse, etc. Teens are more receptive to information that comes from the news than to lectures from you.

Speak when you are angry

and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.

~Ambrose Bierce

19. Stop, look and listen: A hurtful comment or an attempt to argue is normal teen behavior. When this happens, **stop**, don't react; **look** at your teen as if she were someone else that you have an urgent need to communicate with effectively, i.e., your boss; **listen**, really listen to your teen and try to discover what the real problem is.²

20. Yelling gets attention, but directs it at you, instead of the mistake or the bad decision!

Let's face it, who of us finds it easy to think when someone is yelling at us?

21. Develop the art and skill of remaining calm when you don't feel calm. One way to begin doing that is to ask yourself the following question: "Is what I am about to say going to help the situation?"



22. Save long discussions for times when you and your teen are calm.



23. Let your children handle any responsibility they are capable of handling. They can fill out their own forms, make their own lunches, earn their own spending money. \$\$\$\$\$\$\$



24. When tackling problems, remind your teenager that you love him and that you know how smart and capable he is.¹

It kills you to see them grow up.

But I guess it would kill you quicker if they didn't.

~Barbara Kingsolver

6

25. Know it's okay for teens to want to push away. This is a healthy part of growing up and becoming separate human beings from their parents.



26. Develop a special practice that you can share. Although teens may act as though the Sunday breakfast is a big “drag,” it is important to have rituals. Not only does it keep the teen centered in a busy time, it lets the teen know that you still find your time with her important and meaningful.



27. Begin to shift your role from parenting to coaching. Ask questions like, “Have you considered...?” or, “Is there another option?” or, “If you try A versus B, what will happen?”

28. If your kids don't seem interested in listening to you, you might not be saying anything that captures their attention.

Most parent-to-child communications center around instructions, reminders, reprimands or questions. Kids often want to engage with their parents but are turned off quickly if the subject is not personally interesting or important to them.

30. If they don't want to talk, don't try to force it by asking questions. It's good to be present, to talk casually (and briefly) about your own activities and interests, current events, etc., without expecting it to become a dialogue all the time.

29. Make sure they know they can always come to you no matter how big or small the problem. Being open to their problems and addressing them in a consistent and loving manner teaches teens how to handle problems as they arise.

The best way to keep children at home is to make the home atmosphere pleasant, and let the air out of the tires.

~Dorothy Parker



31. When you talk about college or other post-high school plans with your teen, be sure that you discuss the best “match” for your child. Discuss many different options for post-high school education; sometimes the best education for your child might be found at a local community college, vocational school, or small liberal arts college that doesn't have a famous name.

**You can tell a child is growing up
when he stops asking where he came from
and starts refusing to tell where he is going.**

~Author Unknown

32. Let your teen know you will be available to pick him up if he is in an uncomfortable or threatening environment. Save the questions for the next morning if he doesn't want to tell you more at the time.

33. It is never too early to talk to your teen about sex.



*34. Take a hike, ride a bike.
Often teens will open up more
while in motion. Fresh air
and exercise are a plus.*

8



35. Look for opportunities to talk about sex with your teen such as news and TV shows with sexual themes, peer situations, ads. Most teens would like to have more open, honest conversations about this with their parents, but don't know how to start.

36. If you are concerned, call a professional, such as ACS, to get an opinion. Professionals can help you because of their experience and because they are more removed from the problem than you as a parent.



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**37. Remember
you love your
child even if you
do not always
like or approve of
his behavior.**

**There are times when parenthood seems like nothing
but feeding that mouth that bites you.**

~Peter DeVries

38. Studies show that parental values affect a teen's sexual activity. Be clear about stating your concerns about teen sex and the reasons for your concerns.

39. Be a role model for your teen and live by the values you wish for her to learn. Your teen won't respect a "Do as I say, not as I do" attitude.

40. Try not to ask questions that have yes/no answers. Stimulate dialogue by asking something open ended. Instead of, "Did you have a good day?" try, "Tell me the best and worst parts of your day."



41. Realize that one week of grounding is an eternity for a teen.

"Every child is an artist.

The problem is how to remain an artist after he grows up."

~Pablo Picasso

42. Some children need encouragement to take on new challenges. Parents can encourage healthy risk taking by seeking opportunities in settings that are not dangerous.

44. Believe in his future, without denying or downplaying current difficulties. Even when there are significant problems in the present, it is important for parents to maintain a vision of their children as good people with positive qualities and talents, who can overcome these difficulties in time.

43. Don't compare your teenager to your other children or to any other teenager. Value her for who she is and accentuate her positive attributes.

45. Try not to fall into the trap of overscheduling. Listen closely to your teen's desires/fears/reasons, and together, you should come to an agreement about workload and commitments for the year.

46. See your teens as separate individuals, in the present. They are not who you were at that age, and they're also not who they were at age eight.

48. Take time to get to know your child's friends and their families. Welcome your children's friends into your home and talk to them openly.



49. Make an effort to get to know their world, their music, their favorite TV shows. Sit down with them and join their listening and watching.

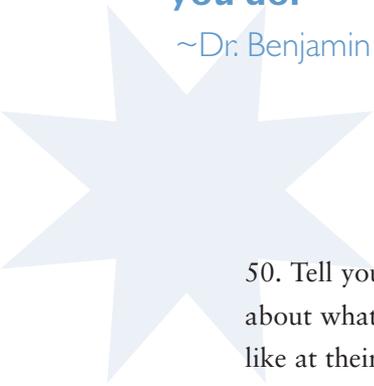
47. Be specific when asking for information or feedback: for example, "How did your presentation go in English today?" as opposed to, "How was school?"

**Each of us is born into the world as someone;
we spend the rest of our lives trying to find out who.**

~Dean Hamer and Peter Copeland

**Trust yourself.
You know
more
than you think
you do.**

~Dr. Benjamin Spock



50. Tell your kids about what you were like at their age. Offer stories that show you as real and human. Ask them what they'd like to know about your adolescence. If you're not comfortable answering certain questions, you can pass on those.

51. Confident parents are clear and consistent with their expectations, not demanding and severe. Confident parents do not demean, patronize or punish their children unfairly. They treat their children with respect and demonstrate their love and warm feelings for their children even when angry, disappointed and frustrated.



52. Parents need to take care of themselves! When parents are less stressed, they are much better able to help their teens.

53. Invite your teenager to access your knowledge and wisdom, rather than forcing it upon them because you think they need it. For example, you might say, "I know it's tricky to turn down alcohol when it's offered at parties. Let me know if you'd like some ideas on what you could say."

Drawing on my fine command of language,

54. *Take long and short drives and just listen to your kids as they babble on. Listen even more carefully when their friends are in the car.*

55. Stay approachable. Make it okay for your teen to talk to you even if she has made a mistake or is in trouble.

56. Ask your teen, “What options are you thinking about?” Your teen will seek you out more if he doesn’t feel that you will trivialize the issue by offering up an immediate solution.

13

57. Give your teens the chance to say something by allowing for quiet.

58. Teens have *shades* or *blinds* that drop down over their eyes.

When you see an unfocused look, stop talking and wait quietly with a smile.

shush!
I said nothing.
~Robert Charles Benchley

**Don't worry that children never listen to you;
worry that they are always watching you.**

~Robert Fulghum

59. Remember your actions speak much louder than anything you can say.

60. Invite your teenager to join the discussion. If kids are not invited, they may not speak at all.

62. Rather than, "What's the matter?" consider, "I'm here if you feel like talking."

61. Watch the subtle messages you might be sending to your teen about the importance of grades versus effort. By keeping the focus on effort and genuine learning, parents can help reduce unhealthy levels of stress and anxiety surrounding school grades and test scores.

63. *Talk with your kids during other activities when you don't have direct eye contact. Driving in the car, playing tennis or basketball, and watching a TV show are all great times to engage.*



65. Go somewhere/do something different with your teen. Doing something out of the ordinary gives you a great chance to make a connection. If possible, let him choose. Be open to your teen's ideas about things you wouldn't usually do.



64. Humor, not of a belittling nature, but one of fun that covers a serious message, can make a teen stop in his tracks and listen.

**Sing out loud in the car even,
or especially,
if it embarrasses your children.**

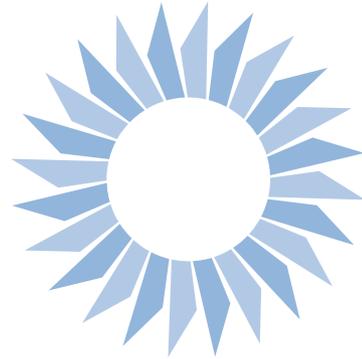
~Marilyn Penland

66. Over time, family members can slowly lose curiosity about one another. Break out of this by trying to ask all your family members a little more what they think and feel. Ask them about what is important to them at this time. Make sure the question is genuine and try not to be shocked by the answer.

Children reinvent your world for you.

~Susan Sarandon

67. Ask your teen's opinion about family matters, such as vacations, rules, family illnesses, etc. Though teens may not have the deciding vote, they're old enough to be included in discussions of and decisions around these matters.



**68. Ask them what they learned in school today.
A very old joke is if they can't think of anything then
it is time to get a job.**

*69. Many adolescents
find it difficult to be affectionate.
Find an acceptable way to
touch them, such as a foot massage
or a back rub.*

70. Our teenagers' problems and hurts may seem trivial to us, but to them they are painful, especially when they relate to their friends. Teens don't always have the skills and wisdom to cope with these pains. Be empathic when they are talking with you.

Why don't you get a haircut?

You look like a chrysanthemum.

~P.G. Wodehouse



**72. Many teens develop a keen sense of humor.
Laugh with them when you can.**

71. School is a big part of teenagers' lives. Make a point of reading their school newspapers, including articles or opinions written by students and teachers/staff alike, so you can be up on campus happenings, controversies and issues.



73. Always emphasize your love for your child. If she has green hair, which you don't like, find something to admire, such as, the straight part.

74. Pick your battles.

The young always have the same problem—how to rebel and conform at the same time. They have now solved this by defying their parents and copying one another.

~Quentin Crisp

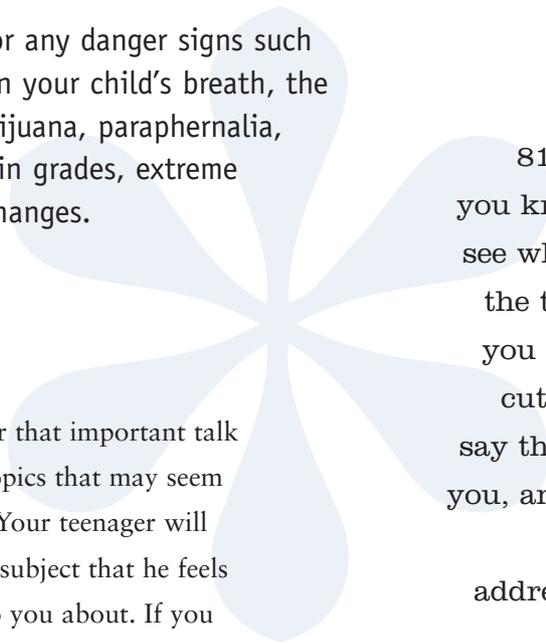
76. Respect your teen's friendships. Criticizing your teen's friends is likely to be seen as criticizing your teen as well.

75. Avoid taking your teen's anger as a sign that you have failed as a parent. Do try to call a time-out from verbal attacks and unproductive shouting matches, even if you have to walk away from them.

78. If you are supportive and inclusive of your teen's friends, you will be more involved in their loop of activities and conversation.

Q&A

77. Raise the subject of sex with your kids. Don't wait for them to ask questions. Just as they need more information about nutrition every few years, they need more information about sexuality every few years. They need an ongoing dialogue. Talking with them about what's on TV—depictions both healthy and unhealthy—is one way to start a conversation.³



79. Watch for any danger signs such as alcohol on your child's breath, the smell of marijuana, paraphernalia, severe drop in grades, extreme friendship changes.

80. Remember that important talk begins with topics that may seem unimportant. Your teenager will first choose a subject that he feels safe talking to you about. If you listen well, your teenager will eventually move to topics that are closer to the center of his struggles.¹

81. Don't ask questions you know the answer to, to see whether they'll tell you the truth. For example, if you know that your child cut her 5th period class, say that the school notified you, and then you and your teen can move on to addressing the problem of school attendance.

**If you tell the truth
you don't have to remember anything.**

~Mark Twain

**If you have never been hated by your child
you have never been a parent.**

~Bette Davis

82. Set limits and be consistent.

If your rule is no parties without adults, call and talk to the adult who is chaperoning so your rule can be enforced.

83. Do not say “no” unless you think you have the energy to carry through!

84. You are not your child's best friend. You are a parent and will remain a parent. Act accordingly.

85. You are still a great parent when saying “no” to your child when appropriate.

86. If threatening your child with consequences, stick with them ***all the time!***



87. Only make rules that you can enforce without becoming a cop or Secret Service agent.

89. Always be willing to admit your mistake and say, "I am sorry."



88. One Minute Rule. When talking with a teen, you get one minute. Start by choosing one simple point to make when having a discussion with your teen. Make that point in one minute or less and then be quiet.²

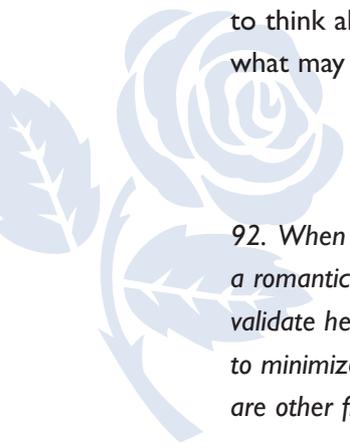
90. Just as you did when they were younger, tell them you love them each day!



Sometimes it's worse to win a fight than to lose.

~Billie Holiday

91. Discuss thorny subjects by appointment, not by impulse. Meeting by appointment gives a teenager time to think ahead and gather strength for what may be a difficult discussion.¹



Things are never so bad they can't be made worse.

~from the movie, *The African Queen*

92. *When your teen is going through a romantic break-up, just listen and validate her feelings. Do not say things to minimize this for her, such as, "there are other fish in the sea."*

94. You don't need to continue a conversation in which you are being disrespected and verbally abused. Respond by firmly ending the conversation and letting your child know that you want to continue the discussion at a later time when you are not being treated poorly. Work together to create some ground rules. For example, no yelling, name calling, or being disrespectful of each other. You may need to repeat this sequence several times before you reach a conclusion that is satisfactory to both of you.



93. *If, in the heat of the moment, you cannot communicate with your teen without yelling, **do not speak.** Write a short message on a Post-it note and put it on the bedroom door to be read later.*

Calvin: Sometimes when I'm talking,
my words can't keep up with my thoughts.
I wonder why we think faster than we speak.

Hobbes: Probably so we can think twice.

~Bill Watterson

95. *Avoid hurtful teasing
or ridicule. Don't compare
your teen to others, whether
it's a sibling or a peer.*

97. *Express empathy and respect towards whatever the teenager
is struggling with but try to hold off on giving advice.*

98. Ask questions
in a respectful way
to learn more
about what they like
and why.

**99. When teenagers begin to share an experience with you, listen with
care. Don't be judgmental. Let them lead the conversation.**

96. As painful as it may
be to watch, it is
important for children to
learn to deal with the
consequences of their
actions (unless, of course,
these actions are
dangerous or life threat-
ening). Their choice may
not be what you would
prefer, but they are
learning to take
responsibility for
their choices.

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Hand in Hand

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