

Adolescents: Ways to connect through better conversations

Adolescence brings a range of challenges for young people as they navigate the journey of growing up.

Things like significant changes in their bodies, blemishes on their skin, relationships, managing the big emotions when there is discomfort or distress, working through their identity, where do they fit in their world, what makes them special, as well as all the normal worldly worries; climate change, protecting the environment, equality, violence and war, and finding kindness. Their world is full and busy, and friendships are crucial during these formative social years.

Common struggles adolescents face in their daily lives consist of judgement, their fear of being wrong, criticism, their sense of not being enough in comparison to their peers or their future selves.

Adolescents are also super sensitive to embarrassment and inadequacy. Their ideas around their future selves are formed by the important adults around them, and of course, the role models they choose to follow on social media.

“Talking is not just about conversations, it is always about connection.”

Our brain is a **mapping tool**. It is an organ that is wired to receive instruction from its environment and its carers so that it develops the ability to predict what will happen next.

The brain “pins” every experience you will ever have in your life. As it develops, the brain constantly scans its environment for cues. These cues are primarily received from what we hear and see.

Your adolescent has been watching and listening to you since birth. They can probably predict, with fairly good accuracy, what is going on for you, and possibly what you are about to say, so they avoid you on contact!

If the adolescent has been listening to elevated rates of stress or watching mixed patterns of responses, they cannot predict well, so they retreat. Either way, it starts with us.



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Parents often approach conversations already set on their own intentions and outcomes.

Parents value efficiency. Adolescents like to be vague. Parents seek outcomes. Adolescents want options. But options are not part of the parent efficient plan. Outcomes are not part of the adolescent options. If parents railroad, adolescents withdraw.

Parents throw up their hands, vexed, “why won’t they listen?”. The irony is, that is what young people are being asked to do all the time; **listen**. The expectation from parents is often compliance. The adolescent just wants to have a go at voicing their thoughts, without their opinion having finality.

We need to let them practice. However, parents can misinterpret their opinions as being fact. Adolescents need our help to teach the vital skill of reflection.

**“Mini Conversations are better
than epic marathons.”**

If you would like to have conversations
with your adolescent,
***place your attention on how you
finished the last one.***

Was your adolescent lifted, encouraged or inquisitive? If they were, you're on the right track. Notice I didn't say happy, content or entitled? A growing brain needs to be stretched, not held constantly in content. Of course, our adolescents must feel safe, secure and soothed by their caring adult.

If you would like to have conversations with your adolescent, ***play the long game.***

With a developing frontal cortex, expect multiple attempts. There is a lot happening in their lives, keep the conversations short and simple, with optimism as your lens. See these opportunities as possible, potential and progress. It might not happen as quickly as you'd like, but your unwavering sponsorship keeps them anchored to the development of their confidence.



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If you would like to have conversations with your adolescent, ***don't control the outcome.***

Your task is to challenge and help them expand via conversations of care, not conversations of control. These two conditions are not mutually exclusive. We want to move them over time toward autonomy, not co-dependence.

Give them permission to try and fail (within reason) and come back to you when they need. As a parent, you may have the answer, but that answer belongs to you, not them. Ask questions that allow them to think about their own options, ideas and suggestions. Allow them to develop their own problem-solving skills. Hold your tongue and breathe.

If you would like to have conversations with your adolescent, ***provide descriptive declarations that spotlight family values.***

We don't realise how much we complain about their lack of responsibility. Catch them doing well. "It was nice to hear your patience with your brother, he really values your responses".

Your job is to open the space, not close it.

If we describe intentions and behaviours of our children back to them when they are engaging, participating, and helping, then they are clearer about what is valued and accepted.

The truth is, we play a key role in their socialisation. It can be confronting to hear but it's a responsibility we all share.

If you would like to have conversations with your adolescent, ***check your mood meter.***

If you are in a reactive emotional state and prickly, then this is what you will elicit in your child. Run a self-check prior to connecting.

If you are elevated, your response may become attacking; if you are disappointed, your response may fall into victimising; if you feel trespassed, your response may project excessive guilt.



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The mood and language you use will either activate your adolescent's limbic and emotional brain sites or connect with their prosocial and thinking pre-frontal cortex.

Emotions are contagious

Ensure you anchor into stability and make a commitment to pivot from a place of care.

If you would like to have conversations with your adolescent, **show vulnerability**.

Showing vulnerability, when done right, can have huge benefits for confidence and resilience.

When adults model how to face hard emotions and recover, adolescents learn it's normal to struggle sometimes and that they can get through it. But vulnerability without balance can overwhelm both parent and child – and can feed into their anxiety, if not done right.

The key is showing not just the struggle, but the recovery. When done well, vulnerability becomes a powerful tool for connection, growth and helping adolescents manage their own emotions more confidently.

It's not just what we say to our adolescents, but what we model when we're not speaking that truly shapes them. Be kind, be encouraging, and be optimistic in your everyday actions.

When they see this consistently, adolescents are less defensive and more open when it's time to talk.

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