

MARCH 13, 2024

KNOT TO WORRY

Getting Teens to Talk



One of the hardest – and most common – realities of raising a 10to20 is that they tend to clam up. Somewhere around age ten or eleven, many previously chatty kids suddenly adopt a sphinx-like silence. As one-word answers replace detailed accounts of the day, parents can worry about what they're missing, long for the closeness they enjoyed with their pre-adolescent child, and even feel personally rejected.

When teens start holding their cards close to the vest, there are two things parents should keep in mind. First, becoming more private is part of healthy development. Our 10to20s are working their way toward their independence, even while living under our roofs. To do so, they often develop a psychological distance as a way to prepare for the physical distance that will come when it's time for them to move out. Second, our 10to20s unusually *do* want to connect with us, but in ways that are often different from in the past.

After decades of talking with teenagers and their families, here are a few strategies I've learned about how to get 10to20s to open up.

Let teens set the terms — Creating the conditions where 10to20s feel comfortable is a great way to encourage them to share what's on their mind. Some teens talk most freely when the conversation isn't face-to-face (like on a walk or riding in the car), while others open up when they know the conversation won't last too long (like when they are heading out the door or off to bed). Honoring their terms of engagement is essential here.

Focus your questions — Instead of asking "How was school?" or "What did you do today?" try asking more focused questions such as "What was the best or hardest part of your day?" The broader your line of questioning, the less likely you are to find yourself in the conversation you are craving. Sometimes, a quick text checking in on your teen is a welcome way in. This gives 10to20s the chance to process our questions and not have to respond on the spot. Remember: connection is the goal – and there are many ways to get there.

Be present without an agenda — Adolescents really appreciate it when the adults in their lives are "just around" without asking them to do something or peppering them with questions. Set aside and protect unstructured time with your teen. It is often in these quiet, unscripted moments that they feel most relaxed and are more likely to open up.

Young people change so much between the ages of 10 and 20, so we shouldn't be surprised that their way of relating to us changes too. What's the bottom line? Staying connected to our kids as they move through adolescence usually requires that we stay open to how *they* want to be in touch.