



Involving Your Teen In Decision-Making

A newsletter for parents of youth in Wisconsin

Issue 2: Parent-Child Communication

How can parents help teenagers learn to make good decisions?

Good communication is key! That means talking about options, responding to feelings, asking questions, and listening to opinions.

We offer some suggestions from experts and research in youth development in the column on the right. Plus, look inside for more tips on talking with and listening to teenagers...

Involving your teenager in family decisions...

- ♥ Can increase family harmony
- ♥ Helps you learn more about her likes and dislikes
- ♥ Gives you a fresh perspective for problem-solving
- ♥ Teaches him about responsibility
- ♥ Shows you what decisions she's ready to make alone
- ♥ Lets him practice making decisions safely, under your guidance and protection
- ♥ Offers her the chance to be a good role model for younger siblings

Communicating about Decisions

It's a two-way street

Be fair and allow some give and take in decision-making. Be ready for negotiations and compromises. If you expect your teenager to meet you halfway, you also must be willing to give up some of what you want.

Understand different perspectives

Keep in mind that what you're worried about and what you hope for when making a decision may be very different from what's on your kid's mind. Make the effort to understand what's really going on. What is most important to your son? What is he not willing to risk?

Tolerate different opinions

Part of fair decision-making is respecting the opinions of everyone involved. You and your teen won't always agree, but if you show respect for her opinions, you'll help build her self-esteem.

Give clear explanations

Always offer clear explanations for decisions. This is good role modeling; it helps your teen learn how you think about and make decisions.

Set ground rules and boundaries

As a parent, it's your place to set and enforce sensible limits. Be clear about your expectations. Never allow your teen to risk health, safety, or great expense. Do not sacrifice your moral values just to get along.

Finally, remember: no two children are the same

You probably will have to use different communication strategies with different kids. What worked for your oldest child may not work for your middle child.

Tips from Teens

We asked local young people about the best ways for parents to communicate with teens. Here is what they said.

“ Keeping it relaxed I think is the most important thing. Yeah, keeping it relaxed through nonverbal communication and eye contact. And sitting down is probably a good idea, that tends to be a more relaxed discussion. When you sit down, there’s more of a focus. **Joe, 18**”

“ I think it’s important for parents to set an example for their kids of how they want them to react and to behave in these sorts of situations and to not raise their voice or do anything that they would consider inappropriate for their child to do. **Kyung, 15**”

“ You can tell when an adult is listening by their body expression. Their body expression tells all. Just the way they respond to you, you can tell if they was listening. If they wasn’t listening, they will say, “Could you repeat what you just said?” And you can pretty much know by their expressions and what they say back to you. If they are really interested in trying to understand what you are doing, they will talk back to you. They’ll ask questions about it. If they are just sitting there like “oh, okay,” and not looking at you or whatever, you can pretty much tell they aren’t paying attention. **Maya, 15**”

“ If you interrupt something that your kid is doing, they’re not going to want to talk as readily. Wait until when you know that the kid’s not doing anything, and say, like, “Can you spare five minutes?” **Robby, 13**”

“ I think if a parent is going to have a discussion that says, “This is the way it’s going to be, and there’s nothing you can do to change that,” they just need to be up front about it and not try to play it off as “You have some influence in this when you really don’t.” You know, no matter what age the kid is there are always some decisions that the parent is going to have to make like that. If the kid is going to be able to have a significant voice in the discussion, then tell them that. If not, you got to tell them that too, because it’s when kids get confused about how much influence they really have that they get frustrated. **Derrick, 19**”

“ Well, my parents usually offer reasons for their decisions. “Because I said so” has never been a reason for anything in our house. And everyone is always allowed to present an argument, and they do so. So in the end, a decision is never delivered without a reason, and in the end, you usually don’t feel like they’ve been unjust in their decision. **Meredith, 14**”

“ Well, don’t yell at them. Don’t be like, “Are you doing drugs!?” No, talk to them about it, be honest with them. I’m not saying, you know, let them do drugs, let them go out and have sex and whatnot, you know. I think that, just being down-to-earth with them, and checking up with them, and listening to them instead of preaching to them. But listen to them. Of course, you still have to do that whole parent thing. You still take that stance “I’m the parent, you’re the child” but, you know, you create a bridge between them that’s more comfortable. **Ramón, 17**”

“ I think that the longer a discussion takes, the poorer it goes. Because as time goes on, communication gets less and less because teenagers usually want to be doing something else. So if it’s something important, just be up front about it and say, “This is important, but it will not take that long.” **Christie, 15**”

Getting the Most from Parent-Child Conversations

How to Talk

Parents have a powerful influence on how young people see themselves. The way you talk to your teenager sends a message. Pay attention to your tone of voice and manner of speaking. Be calm, upbeat, and encouraging.

Get started talking!

Timing is Everything

Decisions are made best when people feel calm and have plenty of time to discuss options. Avoid making decisions in the heat of the moment. If your teen broaches a touchy issue when you're feeling stressed or angry, explain that you want to wait until you've cooled off. And return the courtesy: don't bring up a hot topic when your teen is emotionally distracted.

How to Listen

The way you listen teaches your teen how important his or her ideas are. Be ready to tune in when your teen approaches you. Show with your posture, your gestures, and your words that your daughter's opinion is worth listening to and that you value your son's feelings.

Practice Makes Perfect

Can you remember a time when you were a teenager and you messed up? Everyone makes some bad choices on the way to adulthood. (We even know a few adults who still goof up sometimes.) Be patient and treat a bad decision as a teaching opportunity. Help your teen learn from bad decisions by asking "What went wrong? Why? What would you do differently? How was the result different from what you expected?" Show caring and support.

Ask, Don't Tell

Asking questions is a more successful way to teach a young person than lecturing, confronting, or criticizing. (This is called the *Socratic Method*.)

Follow Up

Stick with your teen after he or she makes a big decision. Encourage accountability. If things don't go well, don't take over or clean up the mess, but do make sure he follows through. If consequences are in order, hold your child responsible. On the other hand, be sure to notice when a decision goes well! When young people do a good job, they need to hear that you've gained more trust in them and that you respect their abilities to make good choices. Back up your words with action: reward your teen with more power when the next big decision comes along.

Try these Conversation Starters with Your Teenage Child

When should adults have more power in making decisions than teenagers? When should teenagers have more power?

We have a problem with... I'd like to know what you think we should do.

Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a decision I made.

How do you feel about [a friend] not having a curfew?

When do you think you will be ready to make all your decisions without me? Why?

How much say should a 10-year-old have about what he wears to school? What about a 13-year-old? What about a 17-year-old?

These newsletters are based on contemporary research and practitioners' experiences. They were written and researched by youth development specialists at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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What Wisconsin Adults Believe about Youth

Often, teenagers are stereotyped as “lazy” or “trouble-makers.” Such negative beliefs about young people can stand in the way of adults including them in decision-making. A study in Wisconsin revealed that few adults strongly agree with positive statements about teenagers, as shown on the right. As you can see, for three of the statements, more than a quarter of adults disagree.

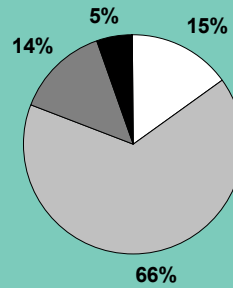
How strongly would you agree or disagree with these statements? How do your beliefs about young people affect your relationship with your teenage child? Do stereotypes ever block you from seeing your child’s true abilities?

Consider talking about this issue with your child. Show your teen the pie charts and ask for a reaction. How does your son cope with negative stereotypes about teenagers? Has your daughter ever felt discriminated against because of her age?

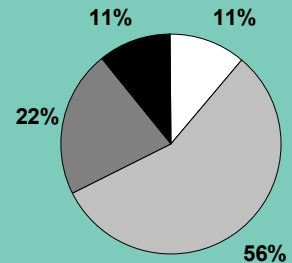
Source: *Youth-Adult Partnerships: Putting Research into Practice* (2002) by Shepherd Zeldin, Linda Camino, Matthew Calvert, and Debra Ivey. University of Wisconsin Extension.



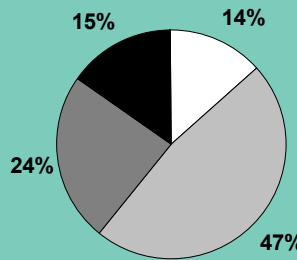
Teenagers in this community are friendly to their neighbors



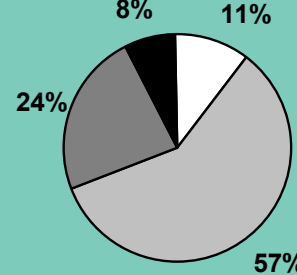
Teenagers in this community treat others with respect



Teenagers in this community have a good work ethic



Teens are interested in helping to improve this community



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