



Parents Make A Difference!

Teen & Parent Communication

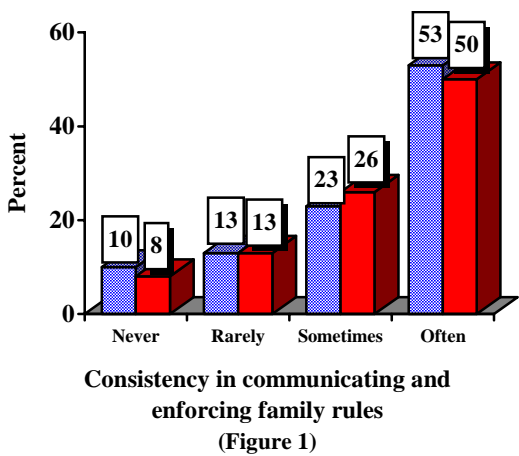
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There may come a time in a parent/teen relationship where communication turns into a one way street, with the parent trying to communicate and the teen trying to avoid it like the plague. This normal phase in the relationship between parent and teen could last a long time, and have devastating effects if the connection between the parent and teen are lost. Data from the recent Southwest Wisconsin Youth Survey (SWYS) which surveyed 3,727 7th through 12th graders in southwest Wisconsin shows that good communication is a key factor in the formation of healthy lifestyles in teens.

Communicating Expectations

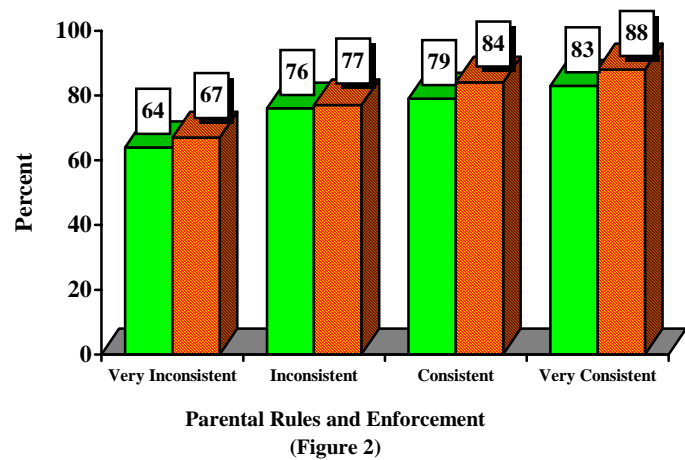
Teens need to know what to expect and need the help of parents in setting those limits, but parents shouldn't be afraid to assist on behavior that reflects their values. At the same time, parents need to respect teen's feelings and opinions by being consistent and willing to discuss the reason for the parent's decisions. Teens gain strength and self-respect from clearly defined limits.

The effects of consistent levels of communication and enforcement of consequences are evident when looking at teen behaviors. Eighty-three percent of teens whose parents practice "very consistent" levels of communication and enforcement of consequences for violating family rules have not had sexual intercourse. (Figure 2) Eighty-eight percent (88%) did not smoke tobacco in the past 30 days, and 95% didn't use marijuana in the past 30 days.



Consistency in communicating and enforcing family rules (Figure 1)

- Consistent communication
- Consistent enforcement



Parental Rules and Enforcement (Figure 2)

- Have not had sex
- Did not smoke tobacco

An important component of good communication is sending clear and concise messages, communicating expectations, and consistently enforcing consequences. Figure 1 above shows around 50% of teens report their parents "often" make sure they know ahead of time what the consequences will be if they break one of their parent's rules, and that they "often" enforce consequences when rules are broken at home.

Parents Make a Difference!

Teen responses to questions about the frequency of good talks with their parents can be seen in Table 1. More teens in Southwest Wisconsin report having frequent talks "sometimes" or "often" with their parents on plans after High School and personal problems; than issues such as drugs, sex, birth control or STDs. While many parents feel it is close to impossible to have a conversation with their teenager, there are ways.

Communication suggestions:

- ❖ **Invite sharing.** When your teen returns home from an activity, look him or her in the eyes and say “I’m glad to see you. How did it go?”
- ❖ **Acknowledge his or her feelings.** Give a description of what you heard. Say “You sound worried/excited/frustrated/angry.”
- ❖ **Encourage problem-solving skills.** Say, “Tell me what you think is going on.”
- ❖ **Ask for your teen’s opinion.** Ask “What do you really want to do?” or “What is your gut reaction to that?”
- ❖ **Encourage talk as a way to clarify values and learn.** Ask, “What did you learn from that experience?”
- ❖ **Use your parent “radar.”** Most parents can tell when something is going on or when something is important to their teens. Stay a bit closer, observe unnoticed, and let them know you are available if they wish to talk.

Listen – So They’ll Talk, And Talk – So They’ll Listen

Listening can be an effective tool to strengthen communication between parents and teens. Parents can help teens arrive at solutions by clarifying feelings and considering problems more rationally. Listening requires practice, but if parents use this tool, it will be easier for their teen to talk to them.

Parents are encouraged to take about 5 or 10 minutes a day to have a brief, relaxed conversation with their children. These frequent talks can help parents spot a small problem before it becomes a big one. Sometimes parents use these talks to criticize, command, or correct the teen. Before long, saying negative comments becomes a habit that parents are not aware of.

To avoid this, be sure you have open-ended conversations about sports, books, movies, hobbies, and world events, among other things. It may help to do something together when you talk – preferably when others are not around.

Communication with Parents (Table 1)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Mother – <i>Job or education plans after high school</i>	22%	17%	28%	31%
Father – <i>Job or education plans after high school</i>	34%	26%	24%	22%
Mother – <i>Personal problems</i>	33%	24%	23%	19%
Father – <i>Personal problems</i>	49%	22%	17%	10%
Mother – <i>Dating & sex, birth control, & dangers & risk of STDs/STIs, AIDS, or HIV</i>	40%	24%	21%	14%
Father – <i>Dating & sex, birth control, & dangers & risk of STDs/STIs, AIDS, or HIV Sex</i>	57%	21%	12%	9%
Mother – <i>Risks of drinking or taking drugs</i>	39%	25%	22%	11%
Father – <i>Risks of drinking or taking drugs</i>	50%	23%	16%	10%

Listening Tips

- ✗ **Be attentive.** Stop your activity, focus fully with your eyes and ears.
- ✗ **Encourage talk.** Making eye contact, nodding, smiling indicates understanding. Keep questions brief, open and positive. Try to avoid “why” questions. Repeating and important idea can help draw out the teen to discuss further.
- ✗ **Empathize.** Try to remember what it was like when you were a teen. Put yourself in their shoes.
- ✗ **Listen with respect.** React to your teen as you would an adult friend. Spend as much time listening as talking. Try not to interrupt or push a topic.

Talking Tips

- ✗ **Show respect.** Show the same courtesy to your teen as you would an adult friend.
- ✗ **Be brief.** Stop talking before your teens stops listening. Try not to lecture. Feed a little information and ask for comment.
- ✗ **Watch your tone.** Sometimes it’s not what you say – it’s how you say it. Also watch what you communicate with your eyes and facial expressions.
- ✗ **Be specific.** Communicate in brief, simple terms. Try saying, “I’ll treat you to a haircut on Friday,” instead of saying, “You look so sloppy.”
- ✗ **Express your feelings.** It helps to let your teen know you are an individual with feelings. Emphasize your feelings, not your teen’s behavior.

Remember: Parents Make a Difference!

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References for this edition of “Parents Make a Difference” include: Parenting Teens.aboutcom, Mississippi & Wisconsin State University Extension Publications, Positive Parenting Series.

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