

Strengthening Your Relationship with Your Teen

What to Know

Are you struggling with your relationship with your teen? The teen years can be a roller coaster of tension, intensity, and breakdowns in communication as kids face greater school responsibilities, learn to navigate friendships, strive for independence, and plan for the future. This journey can take a heavy toll on the relationship you have with your teenager.

The first step in strengthening this relationship is understanding your child's needs. If you take the time to see the world through your teen's eyes, you can begin to protect and strengthen the bond. Here are some suggestions.

- 1. Recognize when your teen is seeking connection.** If your teen actively seeks affection, attention, and connection from you, be sure to respond. If you don't have time, say so and set up another time to connect. You might misinterpret your teen's desire to connect as attention-seeking behavior, and maybe your child's attempts to connect with you are clumsy or obnoxious. They might even yell, show off, interrupt, pout, argue, or make inappropriate comments.
- 2. Identify how your child feels loved.** If you express love in a way that your teen can't receive, they'll miss out on your efforts.
- 3. Give your teen space.** You might feel rejected or disconnected when your teen desires alone time. Your teen's need for privacy can be hard to accept or understand, but it goes along with developing autonomy, self-confidence, and independence. Respecting your teen's privacy shows you trust him/her, and it's critical for maintaining a healthy relationship. If secrecy is extreme or your child spends a lot of time alone, this might be a warning sign of other problems. Talk openly about these things before you assume there's a problem.
- 4. Be the back-up plan.** Most teens want to spend more time with friends than with their families, but that doesn't mean they don't want to spend time with you. Research has shown that when a teen has a stable and committed relationship with just one caring, supportive adult, it can make all the difference in a teen's mental health. Be willing to be your teen's back-up plan when activities with friends fall through – or if your teen is excluded.
- 5. Help manage emotions.** If your teen's needs are unmet, it can lead to frustration, anger, resentment, or emotional outbursts. So, talk to your teen about ways to manage emotions. Family activities, mindfulness, exercises, planned breaks, and clear expectations will help everyone handle intense emotions that lead to conflict.

Now that you have a better understanding of what your teen might need from you, here are some ways you can actively build a stronger connection.

Play Games

- Board games – check out coopboardgames.com, playtivities.com, and engagedfamilygaming.com.

- Social games – great conversation starters that get players to talk with each other about opinions and perspectives.
- Video games – Mario Party and Rocket League are great choices. Your teen can even be the “expert” as they teach you how to play!

Plan Adventures – by exploring new places within a short distance from your home. Search for state and town resources for places to explore and local events.

Create Family Traditions and Rituals – to strengthen family connections. You might explain the origin of a ritual or tradition, helping your teen feel connected to family values and history.

Do a Family Project – to build skills, create memories, and connect with family members while doing an activity like baking, building a birdhouse, or planting a garden. You might get involved in community activities or charitable projects, like helping an elderly neighbor do yard work or volunteering at a soup kitchen.

What to Do

Plan to do one family activity each week for the next month. Use the following chart to record your family activities, including the date, activity, what worked well, what didn’t work so well, and feedback you received from your teen.

Date	Family Activity	What Worked Well	What Didn’t Work Well	Feedback

Reflections on This Exercise

What are some of your teen's needs that you identified in this exercise?

In what ways did doing family activities strengthen your relationship with your teen?

Did your teen enjoy this exercise? Why or why not?

What surprised you most about this exercise?

What were the greatest challenges? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
