



Teen Talk....Ten Tips

A tool box for talking with your teen

Margaret Palmiter, Ph.D.

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Communication between parents and teens can be a struggle. Many parents search for new ways to talk with their teen and feel frustrated when their attempts fail. Teen Talk...Ten Tips offers five "types of talk" to consider when talking with your teen and five "talk topics" to discuss with your teen. Think of this as a tool box, with a bit of humor thrown in. Our goal is to give parents some ideas to think about and perhaps a little different perspective. Pick a tool and give it a try. We hope these ideas help and that you can have a little fun with them.



Teen Talk...Ten Tips



Have you just about given up talking to your teen? Do you either start yelling or just leave the room? Does your teen start yelling before you even get to the end of your sentence? If you answered yes to any of these questions, this E-book is for you.

There are no quick and simple answers to improving communication with your teenaged son or daughter. Heck, we don't always do very well as adults talking to each other. Maybe that's part of why we have so much trouble talking to teens.

Don't panic!

Sometimes you just need to take a different approach, use a different tone of voice, get away and get some perspective. It's funny, but sometimes you need to laugh at the situation – and at yourself. You would be amazed at how many times laughter can relieve the tension of communication and turn an entire conversation around.

With those thoughts in mind, we wrote Teen Talk...Ten Tips. It's not rocket science and much of what we suggest involves common sense. Sometimes it just helps to have someone turn ideas around to a different angle – and help you laugh, just a little. In Teen Talk...Ten Tips (not easy to say, is it?), we describe 5 "types of talk" and 5 "talk topics." The information in these types of talk and topics might help you break a negative cycle. Try and say the title fast three times and we promise you will laugh. Sometimes the best strategy to being heard is to not take ourselves quite so seriously. We hope you find these tools helpful. We have a section after each type of talk or topic for you to use to write down some ways you might use these tools for your particular situation.



Types of Talk

You know that old saying – it's not what you say; it's how you say it. That's where Types of Talk comes in. When I moved to the south I had to learn about the saying "Bless her heart." You know that one. If you say "*Bless* her heart" you mean one thing. If you say "Bless her *heart*" you mean something else entirely. It's hard to put on paper, but I think you get the idea. So in these five suggestions, we will spend time on *how* you are talking, not *what* you are saying.

Type 1: Less Talk

Silence is golden – sometimes. There are moments when your teen expects you to come out with a whole lot of words and a whole lot of emotions. What would happen if you just didn't? Obviously we are not talking about moments of grave danger for your teen or when you have to respond to the request for permission to do something in the next 24 hours. We are referring to the moment when you know exactly what you want to say, must say, feel about what you want to say, probably have said before and.....your teen is not the least bit interested in hearing it. What if you didn't say anything? Just don't talk.

We are not referring here to the "silent treatment." You know the silent treatment. That's when you communicate your anger by your silence, withholding your opinion or feelings in order to frustrate or control someone else. Here, we aren't talking about using silence to punish someone. Instead, even though you have strong opinions and feelings about the situation, you purposely and calmly choose not to. You choose Less Talk as a way to keep communication open with your teen. Let's see if I can give an example of what I mean.

Let's say your teen has just announced they are going to become a rap artist and make millions of dollars. That means they don't have to finish high school, let alone go to college. This goal is proclaimed with conviction and certainty. I don't even need to tell you all of the things that would come to a parent's mind when hearing this statement. Here are some possibilities:

"You what?"

"I don't think so."

"There are a million who try for every one who succeeds."

"Why don't you finish school first? Is your homework done?"

I am sure many more came to your mind. But what if you said almost nothing? What if you said something like "Really?" That's the calmly interested "Really" not the "Are you Kidding me Really?"



What if you just “humphed” in a non-judgmental way? What if you said nothing and just waited to see what happened?

I am not suggesting this strategy if your teen has a suitcase packed and is getting ready to board a bus that will take them all the way to Hollywood. But short of that, you can probably keep your opinion out of the process at this point and win a few “humph” points with your teen. Maybe they will be more likely to come and talk to you about alternative thinking later when they change their mind.

Type 2: Soft Talk

This type of talk uses the power of a whisper. The more upset we get, the more we are likely to raise our voice. The more frustrated we are, the more the tone of our voice changes. I think this is one of the hardest types of talk. I tend to wear what I am thinking on my face. Not a good negotiation strategy, huh?

It also makes it is hard to convince anyone I am really open to what they are saying. If I communicate everything I think on my face all the while they are talking, I suspect they will shut up. The same thing is true with the volume or tone of our voice. You know when you are getting “the voice” from a parent. Ours certainly had one they used on us. Perhaps it’s not a bad strategy to try Soft Talk.

When I work with groups of adults, I know that soft talk creates an atmosphere of listening closely. I also know that loud talking raises both anxiety and tension. This does not mean we all turned off our angry switch and will never get angry again for any reason. If you decide to try Soft Talk, you simply turn the volume down two notches on the dial. Try it and see what happens.

Type 3: Funny Talk

This type of talk understands the power of a joke. As in all joke telling, timing is everything. It’s not good strategy if, when your teenage daughter is in tears because a girlfriend said mean things, you choose that moment to launch into your latest “did you hear the one...” jokes. But there are many times when a joke or a simple, funny statement can break the tension of a situation.

There are also times when the best thing we can do is to laugh at ourselves. Laughter clears the brain for better thinking. My father was a master at using humor to diffuse tension. When things would get tense in our house, he would make an outlandish comment, ask a totally foolish question, or just say something like “Well, I guess that needs some more work” when he couldn’t get something to go the way he wanted.



In order to do this, you have to be willing to back up and let the situation in front of you settle into perspective. Sometimes when you step back, you can see humor in the situation. Just be very careful that your humor is NEVER at the expense of someone else, particularly your teen. You are making *light of a situation*, not making *fun of someone*. It's usually best if you use humor to not take *yourself* too seriously. Making a little fun at your own expense is a great lesson to teach your teen.

Type 4: Serious Talk

This is the direct opposite of Funny Talk. Some situations are just serious. If you think your teen is engaging in dangerous or life threatening behavior, you have probably even passed the point of Serious Talk and need a more dramatic intervention or professional help. However, there are times short of a major crisis, when serious talk should be your talk of choice.

When you are dealing with issues of fairness, basic courtesy, honesty and integrity, serious talk is necessary. That means your tone of voice, the volume of your voice and your expressions all need to convey that the topic *matters* to you. You aren't just wasting your breath here. You really think this is important.

Kids always know when we are giving them a standard reply to a situation but we either don't believe it or don't take it very seriously. They also learn that based on what we do as well as what we say. So – make sure you use serious talk about things you can stand on when you look at your own behavior.

Oh, yeah, and pimples, haircuts, girl/boyfriends, and the latest insult by a friend are all very serious to your teen. Sometimes you use Serious Talk to show that you understand how much it matters to your teen, even if it may not seem that serious to you at first glance.

Type 5: Mad Talk

Some things should absolutely make us mad. Anger is an appropriate reaction for certain behaviors, comments or decisions our teen might make. That does not translate into yelling, however. Anger is communicated a number of different ways. The image of a parent yelling with a totally red face and blood vessels popping may be popular in the cartoons. That doesn't mean it's an effective way of communicating your anger to your teen.

The most important aspect of Mad Talk is that you are communicating your anger at *behaviors*. You can be very angry about something your teen did or said or decided. The trick with Mad Talk is to make sure that your anger never cancels out your love. Ouch. That is really tough. Sometimes when we are so angry or disappointed with our teen's behavior, you don't feel very loving at that moment.



But your Mad Talk can't give that away. So, you might use a little Soft Talk, Serious Talk and Mad Talk all rolled together. Here's how it could go.

Your teen has just driven home and when they walk in the door, you realize that they have been drinking. You know better than having the conversation then, but the next morning you get your teen up early and tell them you want to speak to them downstairs. (OK, so maybe that's a little bit of payback, but no one said you aren't human).

My opinion about Mad Talk is that it isn't about a conversation or asking your teen questions and waiting for an answer. When you have this kind of situation, you already know the answer and you are making a life-saving point. There are many excellent resources about what you should tell you teen about drinking and driving. I don't want to discuss the *what* here, I want to talk about *how*.

1. You are angry. You know how dangerous their behavior is. There isn't any smiling during this conversation.
2. You will talk with a lot of pauses while you collect your thoughts. This helps you and also lets your teen know exactly how angry you are – much more so than yelling.
3. I would also use Soft Talk. Talking in whispers (not totally, but you know what I mean) will communicate your reaction in a powerful way.
4. There is little you will want to hear from your teen. In fact, you may want to tell them that you will hear from them, but later, not now.
5. Always end with the "I am angry because I love you" – even if they roll their eyes.
6. Wait until later to decide the punishment. This is the kind of talk that needs thinking about.

There are also times when your teen's choices will cause you to use Mad Talk, even though the decision or issue doesn't put your teen at risk of physical harm. If you learn that your teen has bullied another child, made fun of someone who is different or has a disability, these are also times for Mad Talk. Not only is the issue important, but your teen's behavior is unacceptable to you.

What makes Mad Talk difficult is that legitimate anger about behavior is hard to control. Your anger may be fueled by all of the right beliefs, motivations and reasons. But unless you can control the anger to allow you to speak with control, your teen won't hear you.



Use this page to think about the type of talk you could use when communicating with your teen. We have listed some typical situations on the left. You can list the types of talk you might like to try on the right. Then go ahead and add some of the communication issues you are having with your teenager.

Situation

Type of Talk

Your teen has stayed out past curfew and they come in and don't want to talk about where they have been.	
You hear your teen call another teen an insulting name or make fun of how they look.	
You have asked your teen to clean their room fifty times and it is still a mess.	
Your teen brings home a terrible report card.	



Talk Topics

This is where we talk about what we say rather than how we say it. There are many other professionals, websites and groups where you can get good information on what to say to your kids about certain important topics, such as driving and drinking or taking drugs. We are taking a slightly different approach. In this book we want to have you think about topics parents rarely discuss with their teen. These topics aren't the ones we think of first when thinking about raising a teenager. But we believe conversations about these topics can make a huge difference in how your teen sees the world and behaves within it.

You will have to spend time with your teen in order to use these topics, and for many parents today that is the real challenge. The idea of the whole family sitting down together for dinner is a rare occurrence in most families. If you do this, congratulations and try some of these topics. If you don't have the family dinner opportunity, you face a challenge to figure out when to work them in. If you drive your teen a lot of places, that is one option. Sitting and waiting for some appointment or waiting for the ballgame to start may be another. You have to be vigilant about your opportunities to have a conversation rather than checking your emails on your blackberry or cell phone. These opportunities won't be long and involved, but take 'em where you can get 'em.

Topic 1: Talk about You

Parents talk to teens about what the teen is doing, what they should or shouldn't do, or what they want them to do. You don't talk very often about yourselves. I am not referring to the "I walked a mile just to go to school" talk. I mean what you are doing – right now. This can be as simple as saying out loud what you are doing at the moment and why you are doing it.

For instance, if you just got a call from a good friend who is having some kind of trouble, take a minute and let your teen know why you are getting in the car and driving over to see her or him. You don't have to betray the confidence of your friend, but think about what you are sharing with your teen by simply letting them know what's up.

1. You care about your friends
2. You believe in being there for people when they need you.
3. Others are struggling with issues that can help us put ours in perspective
4. Sometimes you act in the moment
5. You have friends – yes, you, their parent, have friends that mean as much to you as theirs mean to them.



Don't over burden your teen. Just keep them informed. If you never tell them what's up with you, they are less likely to learn about things beyond themselves. Teenagers are developmentally ego-involved to begin with. It comes with the stage of life. If you share what you think about and what you are doing, it may help them begin to realize that there really is a whole big world out there beyond them.

Be prepared for them to look at you like they really don't care what you are doing and have no interest. The "why are you telling me this?" look. You know the one. Just ignore it and keep going. I think the most important thing to remember about teens is that they work really, really hard at hiding the fact that they care about anything related to parents.

List some examples of things you could tell your teenager about yourself:

What has happened to you in the last week that you could share with your teen?

Think about some of the things you have had on your mind this week and see what you might share.



Topic 2: Talk about Feelings

The question most teens dread the most is "How do you feel about that?" All of you can see the eye-roll already just hearing the question. The trick to talking about feelings with your teen is to admit to your own. Parents work really hard to try and get teens to talk about their feelings. Parents are also good at telling teens when they have feelings (usually negative) related to them. Telling them how they should feel is also something parents do quite well. Do you talk about the feelings you have that are unrelated to your teen?

Here are a few examples of what might come up and feel appropriate.

1. While you are making dinner, you could say "I really miss my Mom when I cook. It reminds me of her."
2. I had trouble sleeping last night because I couldn't stop thinking about Ms. XXX and how she is doing with her husband in the hospital.
3. I love watching XXX because it just makes me laugh.
4. I get so mad when I hear xxx, and it makes me want to...

Or when you would like to clobber your husband/wife when they do something like leave their dirty clothes on the floor of the bedroom, you might actually admit to your frustration in front of your teen. OMG, Mom and Dad are real people!

Often parents believe they must protect their children from strong or negative feelings. Adult issues should be handled separately from the children. But we are talking about teens here. Soon they will be adults, believe it or not. How will they learn how to handle and manage the feelings that come with adulthood if they have no role models? When you admit to having feelings and let them see how you deal with them – the good and the bad – they learn more than any lecture you could give them.

List five feelings you want to share with your teen. How might you share them?

- | | |
|---------|------------|
| 1 _____ | How? _____ |
| 2 _____ | How? _____ |
| 3 _____ | How? _____ |
| 4 _____ | How? _____ |
| 5 _____ | How? _____ |



Topic 3: Talk about Justice

Children and teenagers get their beliefs about justice from their family. Prejudice, cruelty, intolerance and bigotry are all learned. None of us come out of the womb thinking negatively about a particular group of people. You teach your children and your teen about justice every time you watch the news.

We teach teens to have certain positions and opinions on a variety of issues by *not talking* about them. Frequently this is the silent conversation. Teens watch and listen. We talk with our attitude and behaviors, unaware that we are in a conversation. Most of the important issues in our world aren't simple. Taking a position on an issue or event should take work. It means listening and thinking about different opinions and perspectives. It means understanding that people can hold totally opposite positions on something and still be good, decent people. It means being able to hear and think and discuss.

If you have no conversations with your teen, but just let them listen to you when you react to the world around you, you have given them a point of view, but you have not given them the tools they will need to make decisions about other issues they may face in the future. The conversation you have with them, the process of thinking through various issues – these are the ways you teach skills, not just opinions. That is the only way to talk about justice.

What do you want your teen to learn about Justice?

How can you help teach your teen that important lesson?



Topic 4: Talk about History

When I was a teen, I went through my parent's photo albums and they told stories about our family. Those experiences made me a big fan of family histories in all of their forms. Digital photography has totally changed the way we capture memories (a topic in a whole different E-book). So how can you as a parent make sure your history gets shared with your teen?

Some families have a lot of information about the generations that came before them. Others have stories and more limited information. I am a big fan of genealogy because I think it grounds us to know our history. It doesn't have to be a major "roots" project, but it is important for your teen to have a bit of knowledge about those that came before.

This is another way to help your teen learn that there is much more to life than just their experiences. Take another jab at the "it's all about me" framework of adolescence. Researching your family history can also be a wonderful project that can engage all members of the family. As in all things, don't get obsessed. But there are excellent tools and resources out there now that make the process easier. Websites like www.ancestry.org or www.afrigenes.com are a great place to start if you are interested.

Ok, so much for my speech on genealogy, there are lots of ways to talk about history without doing a major genealogical search. Tell stories!! The most important part of history is the stories we tell. Remember those moments of conversation we talked about earlier? These are also take 'em where **when?** you can get 'em conversations? Well, throw in a little story when you have a chance. "Did you know that your great grandmother was the first women in her family to graduate from high school?" That's just an example of course. The art of storytelling is getting lost. Let's get it back again.

Again, be prepared for the "why are you telling me this" look and the eye roll. Trust me, in spite of both, your teen will remember the stories.

What do you know about your family history? Where is the information located? Do you have family members who can tell stories about your family history?

What are your favorite stories about things that happened in your family?



Topic 5: Talk about Life

I am not talking about the educational or the political topics here. I am referring to the simple, personal ones. Parents are often very focused on the particular decisions or behaviors of their teenager. They spend their time thinking or talking about the specifics. When did you come home last night? Where are you going with your friends tonight? Have you finished your homework? Why are your grades so low? How can I encourage you to go to college?

This topic requires that you step back a little, look a little broader, think about how important something really is, and put it in perspective. As we know, life is very simple and very complicated all at the same time. There is so much information coming at us all at once, and yet so little that is truly important in creating peace and happiness. The goal of this topic is to get us to focus on what is really important.

I know, those little things I mentioned earlier are important. Yes, they are. But if we spend our time focused on our belly button, we will miss that glorious sunset. I know it's trite – but you really do need to take time to smell the roses. You teach your teen what matters the most in life by what you spend your time on and what you talk to them about. Don't make it all about the belly button. Look up and out occasionally and share what you are thinking with your teen. I am a sunset nut, but there is just something that happens when I see one. Don't expect your teen to go gaga over the sunsets. But it might be interesting if you shared why you do.

What are some of the things you would love to share with your teen about life in general?

What do you enjoy that has nothing to do with your work or your teen?

How can you share that with your teen?



Conclusions

So, here we are at the end of our tips. We hope you have added some new tools to your toolbox. I know that parents feel both the joy and the burden of wanting to guide your teen to grow into a wonderful adult. Our goal with this E-book was to offer you some things to think about and a few suggestions that might ease that burden – and help you truly *enjoy* your time with your teenager.