

# Help me talk to my teenager



By Sara Listar-Guest, LAMFT

Remember when they were little, and dependent on you to scare away the bad dreams, kiss their “ouchies”, and hold them when they needed it. Now, you feel like an alien has inhabited the body of that lovely little child, they no longer want to talk with you, and when they do engage it is an argument, unless they want something that you want to give them. Fear not, keep reading, I will help you learn to talk to this new person.

One thing I most often hear parents say is “I remember what it was like being a teenager.” I’ll address this one first. Society is changing, and unfortunately children are faced with pressures and issues at a younger age than when we had to deal with them. This means they may be struggling as they are not as mature as you were when you were faced with the same challenge. This is good to keep in the back of your mind when talking with them, because when they say “you don’t understand” they are probably right.

Avoid starting with “when I was your age.” We often times want to jump in and help right away. Remember when they were learning to walk and we had to let them learn how to fall at the same time. How difficult was that? But they managed to learn how to walk and fall with grace! Sometimes all they want is an ear to listen, and not to get advice, or be judged.

Ask your teen what they need from you? If they want to hear what they should do, or what you think, and they state this out loud, then jump in with your experience (age appropriately). If they say “I don’t know” that may be the opportunity to offer to give them advice or offer a hug. If you are not sure how they are feeling ask them! They may not know, as one of the things that has not changed over the years is all of the difficult emotions we experience in our adolescents, often at the same time.

Here is the tough subject, when they want it all! Around the age of 16-17 they start figuring out that they are closer to adulthood, and want to start making more independent choices for themselves. Some of those choices we cannot allow them to make due to safety and laws. However, it does not have to be black and white. Here is where the art of negotiation comes in. Curfew starts to become a big topic. They want to stay out all night, you want them home by 11pm. Ask them what they will be doing if they are out all night, so that you can get a better idea of why they are making the demand. Then negotiate.

If they aren't willing to budge, then you have the upper hand as they told you what they wanted to do, and you can gauge if it is appropriate, and if they need to be out all night doing that. The other part of negotiation is to have them work for what they are asking for. Let them look up and find the things that they want to do. For instance, I have come across many teens who wanted to go to school online so that they would have an easier time finding a job, or they wanted to go to college earlier. Rather than you doing all of the work, use this as an opportunity to teach them how to be independent (what they want in the first place), and ask them to talk to you when they have the cold hard information (rather than what they may have heard through the grapevine). You do your as well so that you can get an idea of the full picture.

The last way would be if you must say no, as all parents must at some point, say it with reason. This shows them that you have thought about what they have said, and put thought into it. They may disagree, but that may be another way for you to continue to engage them.

If you continue to need help in this area, please go to <http://www.familytalkaz.com/> to schedule an appointment.

