

Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:

Handling the Situation : Improving Communication

Sometimes it seems that whatever you say to your child it is taken the wrong way. Sometimes they over-react. Sometimes they will not talk to you at all, or only when they want something. You may feel angry if they will not talk to you with respect.

Communication involves expressing our feelings and wishes, with the hope that we will be 'heard' and our needs respected.

There are things you can do to improve communication with your young person and things that will block communication.

Don't tell me what to do

Your child is now at a stage where they want to make up their own mind about things. When they are little children, we constantly tell them what to do – or not do – and how to do it. As they get older, this is no longer appropriate.

Your adolescent may have a 'red button' that makes them over-react when they think you are telling them what to do. It's a hard habit for parents to break – but remember adults aren't good at being told what to do either.

Non-verbal communication

Only 30% of communication is through speech. The rest is non-verbal communication, such as voice tone, eye contact, body posture and actions. They communicate underlying feelings and meanings. A low, steady voice, soft eye contact, relaxed body posture and gentle hand movements are less threatening and more open.

Bluff

Teenagers often say one thing and mean another. They may use a fair amount of 'bluff' – acting like they do not care, or are not listening, or are rejecting what you say. But often they are not as hostile as they sound. They are trying to learn how to assert their independence in relationship, and this can lead to sounding negative. Try not to get upset or defensive about what they say. Look below the surface for the underlying feeling and meaning.

You have two ears and one mouth

Good communication involves good listening, as well as good talking.

People who are really listening tend to stop what they are doing, look at the other person, nod or say 'uh-huh' to encourage the other person to continue and ask questions that show interest. If you keep doing something else, or listen in stony silence, or jump straight in with your own views, the other person does not feel heard.

Not just difficult things

It is great to have times when the conversation is relaxed and not about important or hard things. Make the most of everyday opportunities to have casual and friendly conversations.

Blocks

Certain ways of talking or responding to your teenager are likely to block communication, such as:

- Constantly telling them what to do
- Warning them about what will happen if they don't
- Preaching about what people should or should not do
- Giving solutions when they haven't asked
- Criticising their character
- Teasing them

- Telling them what their problem is
- Mind reading (guessing what they are thinking or feeling)
- Minimising or ignoring their feelings
- Probing for details
- Side-tracking
- Or bringing up the past

Try to listen to yourself – replay conversations in your mind perhaps – and think about whether you are doing these things. Communication with your teenager will improve if these blocks are avoided.

Say 'I'

When you start a lot of sentences with 'you' it is easy to sound as if you are blaming the other person, and this makes them feel defensive. Try instead talking about how you feel (e.g. "I feel..."), while explaining why you may feel that way and what may help. Take responsibility for how you feel.

Pick your time

When you want to talk about something important, it helps to pick the right time – probably not when they just walk in the door, or when they just get up, or when they are substance-affected or already upset.

It is good to have enough time available to listen to each other and finish the conversation properly. You may notice there are times when you talk better. They may seem more open when there is someone else there, for example, or when you are driving somewhere together or are involved in some activity that you both enjoy.

You may not want to use all these times to bring up something hard or they may avoid these good times too.

Ideally, you need to both be feeling calm. We do not communicate well when we are feeling strong emotions, such as fear or anger. If the conversation gets too emotional, it might be better to stop it then and try again later.

It is important to be available when your child is ready to communicate. Look out for signs they are trying to open a conversation with you. If they try to talk at a time when you really can't stop, make sure they know that you want to talk and suggest a better time.

Plan what to say

Plan ahead when you need to talk about something difficult. Prepare for it. Think about how to introduce the topic in a gentle and non-blaming way. Use soft body-language if you can. Think about what you can say that is positive as well as how to say the more difficult things.

Invite someone else to come

If you know it is going to be a very difficult conversation, it might help to get someone else to sit in. You may both control your emotions better with someone else there.

What do I want?

Try to understand your own feelings and what you really want. Write it down before the conversation if it will help. You will communicate more effectively when you understand yourself more clearly.

You also need to realise that communication is not the same as getting what you want. You may communicate very effectively to your child that you want them to come home by midnight, and your child may understand that. But they may still not do it. The goal of good communication is improving understanding, not control.



Disagreement

Good communication does not always result in agreement. Sometimes good communication will help you both understand why you disagree or that your child's opinion is a valid one. When you understand the reasons why you disagree, you can communicate better about how to respect each other's point of view. It helps when young people can see that you are committed to the relationship, even when you disagree.

Letters

If talking is not working, try writing a letter. If you do decide to do this, be careful about the tone of the letter. Negative things sound worse in writing and are more permanent. Avoid blame and accusations. Try to be as positive and matter-of-fact as you can, and include some praise. Concentrate on explaining how you feel and what you hope to get agreement on.

Model good communication

When parents keep calm, listen more than talk, try to understand and show that they are willing to find a mutually satisfying outcome; they are modelling good communication skills for their young person. In time, your adolescent will learn better communication skills too and the responsibility for good communication will be shared.



Tips from this Help Sheet

- Your child is at a stage where they would like to make more of their own decisions.
- Listen more than you talk.
- Look beyond the 'bluff' for any underlying messages and feelings.
- Pick your moment for talks about important things. Have times for relaxed talk too.
- Be aware of what your body language says.
- Take responsibility for your own feelings – use "I" language.
- Plan what you want to say and how to say it.
- Good communication does not always mean getting what you want or reaching agreement.



Related Help Sheets

- Building our Relationship
- Keeping Calm
- Setting Boundaries
- Dealing with Conflict
- Dealing with Violence



→ **Strong Bonds**
Jesuit Social Services
PO Box 1141
Collingwood Victoria 3066

Tel (03) 9415 8700
Email info@strongbonds.jss.org.au
Web www.strongbonds.jss.org.au

→ **Strong Bonds is a project of Jesuit Social Services.**

Jesuit Social Services work cooperatively with others to engage disadvantaged individuals, families and communities and the wider society to promote health and wellbeing and to address social exclusion.

This project is possible thanks to the generosity of the William Buckland Foundation and the Department of Health & Ageing.