



Tips for Talking With *Adolescents*

Adolescents, despite their protests, need adults and want them to be part of their lives, recognizing that they can nurture, teach, guide, and protect them on the journey to adulthood.

Directing the courage and creativity of normal adolescents into healthy pursuits is part of what successfully counseling, teaching, or mentoring an adolescent is all about. The following tips may be helpful for having conversations with adolescents, as taking time to ask questions and listening without judgment to the answers can be quite effective.

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- ***Engage adolescents with nonthreatening questions.*** Choose one or two questions at a given time and ask questions that help them define their identities. For example, What do you like to do in your free time? What are your hopes for the future? Listen nonjudgmentally and listen more than you speak. This enables the adolescent to realize that you value his or her opinions, and thus to trust you more. *Forgatch, M., & Patterson, G. (1989).**
- ***Ask open-ended questions, questions that require more than a yes or no response.*** This helps the adolescent think through ideas and options. *Hill, C. E., & O'Brien, K. M. (1999).*
- ***Avoid "why" questions, as they tend to put people on the defensive.*** *Plutchik, R. (2000).* Try to rephrase your questions to

get at what the adolescent is thinking rather than the reason for something the adolescent has said or done. For example, instead of asking, “Why did you say that?” say instead: “You seemed to be really trying to get across a point when you did that. Can you tell me more about what you mean?”

- *Match the adolescent’s emotional state, unless it is hostile.* If the adolescent seems enthusiastic or sad, let your responses reflect his or her mood. Reflecting helps a person feel understood. *Forgatch, M., & Patterson, G. (1989).*
- *Casually model rational decision-making strategies.* Discuss how you once arrived at a decision. Explain, for example, how you defined a problem, generated options, anticipated positive and negative consequences, made the decision, and evaluated the outcome. Adolescents have relatively short attention spans, so be brief, and choose a topic relevant to adolescents. *Keating, D. P. (1990).*
- *Discuss ethical and moral problems that are in the news.* Encourage the adolescent to think through the issues out loud. Without changing his or her point of view, wonder aloud about how others might differ in their perspective on the issue and what might influence these differences. *Santilli, N. R., & Hudson, L. M. (1992).*

* For full citations, please go to www.apa.org/pi/pii/develop.pdf

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