

By Nancy Zrymiak

Teenagers: they act different, look different and dress different. Often they grunt “yes” or “no” to questions, slam doors and sleep away the weekends. At the same time, most are tech savvy (often more so than their par-

ents!), and are in constant communication with friends through e-mails, text messages, Facebook and, sometimes even, the phone.

The importance of friendships for teens is undeniable. The adolescent years are full

of conflict, emotion and drama. Just think back to your high school days! But where does that leave us as parents? If you’ve ever felt shut out or excluded as your teen struggles for independence, you’re not alone.

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If you've ever felt uncertain of how to respond when your teen attempts to talk to you and share thoughts or feelings, you're also not alone. Teenagers are full of mixed emotions. It's all a part of growing up.

But what do they really want from you? Here's what they need...

To be heard

"You never listen to me! You just don't care about me." Sound familiar? Imagine a teenager talking to their parents about anything, anything at all. Then, imagine the parents just sitting back and listening—without interruptions. Sure, it sounds simple enough. But for 16-year-old Lisa Allan*, simple doesn't come easy.

"My parents always cut me off to give me advice," she shares, "when I just want to rant on." Allan's parents only want what's best for her, so it's a challenge not to interrupt their daughter at times to offer their thoughts or advice. But often Allan just wants to vent.

One way to truly listen to your kids is to set aside some one-on-one time each week. Let your teen talk, rant or rave about anything. The rule is you can only listen—unless your teen asks for advice. Once your child trusts you to truly listen, you might be surprised at how the lines of communication open up.

To be respected

Everyone wants respect and teenagers are no different. They want to know their parents don't just love, but also respect who they are...and that they are changing, growing and learning along the way. Respect your teen's privacy, respect that he or she requires more sleep, respect that his or her hormones are busy causing a whole bunch of changes, including mood changes. Be empathetic.

Respect is reciprocal: as parents model respectful behaviour, teens will generally show respect in return. At the same time, remember that being a teenager is a new, often tough and overwhelming, experience. Larissa Taciuk, an 18-year-old university student says, "It's a hard time because we struggle with wanting more independence, yet we have to learn to deal with the responsibilities that come with independence." It takes some time and know-how to be responsible. Mistakes will be made. But if you respect your teen enough to allow some errors every now and again, you'll empower who they are and who they become as adults.

To hang out

Chances are they will pick their friends over you when they have the choice. Don't take it personally. Just keep in mind, one of the best ways to show teens love is by spending time with them. Not all the time, as their friends are important. But at least once a month, book a "date" with your child. Keep it fun and ask them what they want to do.

Also, ensure you make time for family meals and to teach your teen some life skills. If you want them to help out around the house, show them how to make their bed or cook a meal together. Talk about their future, school, finances and career planning. Not only are these valuable skills and conversations to have, but the time spent together will also strengthen the bond between you.

To have limits (really!)

Believe it or not, teenagers want and need parents to set limits and maintain a sense of order in their lives. Teens should have a hand in setting rules but, ultimately, parents must decide what's appropriate for their age and maturity level. Rules should never be so rigid that your child feels imprisoned,



however, and you both should discuss them often. As your child matures, consider lighter limits and ways to earn new privileges.

Underneath it all, those pimply faced, gangly kids need a safe place to go—home! A place where it's safe to be tired, cranky, sad, funny and happy. A place where it's okay to talk and sort through feelings and problems. A place where they can feel listened to, respected and loved. **wcf**

**Name changed upon request.*


Nancy Zrymiak, RN, remembers her teenage years like they were yesterday (as do her parents!). She is a writer and mom.

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