



Talking to young people about tough issues

The intensity of today's life issues can be challenging for any adult, so discussing them with an adolescent can be even more complicated. Many parents feel inadequate talking through intimidating topics like sex, drug use, peer pressure or bullying. The following tips on communication, parental reactions and responsibilities can help you navigate conversations with a young person about the tough issues they could face.

Communication strategies

- Treat individually. Every child is unique and responds differently to tough issues. Consider where your child feels most comfortable talking and expressing concerns and questions. Just remember that what works for one child may not for all.
- Share facts. Be sure to give your child helpful, accurate information. Do your research and don't make things up in an attempt to scare or overwhelm them.
- Look for conversation starters. Be on the lookout for ways to bring up a tough topic. A television show or news story can be a great way to gauge how they're feeling about an issue. Watch their body language. Openly share your feelings in the conversation, too.
- Have multiple talks. Your teen might have more in-depth questions as they get older and experience things differently.

Parental reactions

- Spare the lectures. The goal is to have a conversation with mutual discussion. Lectures often scare teens or

cause them to shut down emotionally. When they feel heard, they are more likely to listen.

- Cut out distractions. Make sure you are in the right state of mind to discuss a difficult topic. This means silencing your cell phone, turning off the television and giving your child your undivided attention.
- Don't assume. You don't know what your child does or doesn't know about a topic. If they ask you a question, don't assume it means they're engaging in the behavior. They are coming to you in safety and trust, so making assumptions is a surefire way to jeopardize the relationship.
- Stay calm. When your child sees you panicking and anxious about a situation, they're less likely to open up. Remain composed by listening and asking open-ended questions. Make sure your tone of voice doesn't sound accusatory.
- Model healthy reactions. Children are always looking to see how we react to difficult situations (a death, crisis or bad decision, etc.). Our actions will give them far more information than our conversations will.

Parental responsibilities

- Share feelings and values. Your child knows you have opinions, emotions and values. It's important to explain why you feel how you do. If they know what's important to you, they'll be more likely to consider their own priorities when facing a tough situation.
- See the big picture. When discussing good choices, it's important to talk about what motivates that decision. Educate your child about how making good choices allows us to lead good lives and meet our goals.
- Don't criticize. Occasionally, you may overhear your child talking about another friend's questionable decisions. Be cautious not to criticize and jump to conclusions.
- Pay attention to media. It's important to be aware of what your teen's watching. Better yet, make some popcorn and share some screen time together. Showing interest in their likes is a great way to build bridges for communication.
- Follow up. Typically, today's teens do more of their talking via text than face-to-face or by phone. Consider sending your child a positive text to follow-up after discussing a tough topic. There's no need to feel intimidated or try to be someone you're not. Simply text as you would talk to communicate your appreciation, attention and love.

Finally, it's important to praise a child when they are honest with you about tough issues. Help them understand that having a humble attitude and telling the truth will minimize a possible punishment. Remaining calm and nonjudgmental shows your child you're a safe place and an ally, and they will be more likely to approach you with tough topics in the future.

Sources:

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Adolescent health.
hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-publications/info/parents/get-started/.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Adolescent health resources.
hhs.gov/ash/oah/resources-and-publications/info/parents/conversation-tools/.

Stress, teens and coping tips

If you have a teen, you may already know that they experience stress, just like you. Some stressors for teens may be different than “adult” stressors, for example, keeping up with schoolwork or issues with peers.

While some stress is normal, being under stress for too long can have a negative effect on your mental, emotional and physical health. It can lead to trouble concentrating, anxiety, irritability, changes in sleep patterns and coping in unhealthy ways, such as using drugs or alcohol.

Tips for teens

Just like adults, it’s beneficial for teens to learn how to deal with stress in a healthy way. Share these tips with your teen:

- Get regular physical activity and sleep.
- Break down large projects into easier, smaller steps.
- Establish a strong social circle of friends and family.
- Find healthy ways to relax, like meditation or breathing exercises.
- Understand that doing something well doesn’t mean doing it 100% perfectly.
- Prepare for things that may cause stress. For example, if public speaking is stressful, find a class to help you practice for it.
- Learn how to rephrase feelings, stating things in polite yet firm terms. For example, “I feel upset when you raise your voice,” or “Please stop name-calling.”
- Become aware of negative thoughts and reframe thinking in a positive light. Instead of saying, “I always mess up,” try saying, “I didn’t do this one thing perfectly this one time, but with practice and help I know I can improve.”

Ways you can help

Let’s look at some things that you can do to help your teen better handle stress:

- Monitor any effect stress may have on your teen’s health, how they act, think or feel.
- Promote teen participation in social activities, like sports, without overscheduling them.
- Listen to your teen and keep an eye out for signs of stress.
- Learn new stress management techniques and model healthy coping skills.

If your child is talking about or showing signs of feeling stressed, consider talking to a professional. Trained mental health counselors can help figure out the causes of your teen’s stress and share more ways to help them cope.

Note: If you or someone you know are having thoughts of hurting yourself or others, seek help right away. If someone is in immediate danger, call 911 or go to the closest emergency room. To talk with a trained counselor, you can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline anytime at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

Sources:

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychology: Stress Management and Teens.

aacap.org/aacap/families_and_youth/facts_for_families/fff-guide/Helping-Teenagers-With-Stress-066.aspx.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Anxiety and depression in children.
cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/depression.html.

KidsHealth.org. Childhood stress.
kidshealth.org/en/parents/stress.html.

National Institute of Mental Health. 5 things you should know about stress.
nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress.

Bipolar disorder in children and teens

Bipolar disorder causes mood swings with extreme ups (mania) and downs (depression). When people with this problem are up, they have brief, intense outbursts or feel irritable or extremely happy (mania) several times almost every day. They have a lot of energy and a high activity level. When they are down, they feel depressed and sad.

What are the symptoms?

In children and teens, moods quickly change from one extreme to another without a clear reason. But for a child to have bipolar disorder, these mood changes must be different from the child's usual moods and must happen with other symptoms or changes in behavior.

Times of mania or depression may be less obvious in children and teens than in adults.

- A manic episode lasts at least a week. It is a period of extremely happy, aggressive or angry mood. The child or teen may:
 - Have little need for sleep
 - Have high energy levels
 - Have extreme confidence in themselves
 - Talk very fast
 - Have many thoughts at once
 - Seem very distracted and unable to focus
 - Act inappropriate or are intrusive in social settings
- A depressive episode is a period of sad, low or cranky mood. The child or teen may:
 - Not find pleasure in things they normally enjoy
 - Have low energy or feel "slowed down"
 - Have sleep and appetite changes
 - Have low self-esteem
 - Feel guilty or worthless
 - Withdraw from friends or family
 - Have difficulty focusing
 - Have thoughts about death or suicide

How is bipolar disorder diagnosed in children and teens?

This disorder can be hard to diagnose in children and teens. The symptoms can look a lot like the symptoms of other problems, such as:

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- Substance use disorder
- Conduct disorder

Bipolar disorder can often occur along with these problems.

If your doctor thinks your child or teen may have bipolar disorder, they may ask questions about your child's

feelings and behavior. Your doctor may also give you and your child written tests to find out how severe the mania or depression is.

The doctor may do other tests (such as a blood test) to rule out other health problems. They may ask if your family has any history of mental illness or problems with drugs or alcohol. Any of these problems can be linked to bipolar disorder.

Why is early diagnosis of bipolar disorder important?

Children with this disorder are more likely to have other problems. These include alcohol and drug use, trouble in school, running away from home, fighting and even suicide. Treating the disorder as early as possible may keep your child from having these problems.

Watch for the warning signs of suicide, which change with age. Warning signs of suicide in children and teens may include thinking too much about death or suicide. Watch also for things that can trigger a suicide attempt, such as a recent breakup of a relationship or the loss of a parent or close family member through death or divorce.

How is it treated?

The mood changes that come with bipolar disorder can be a challenge. But with the right treatment, they can be managed well. Treatment usually includes both medicine (such as mood stabilizers) and counseling.

An important part of treatment is making sure your child takes their medicine. Children and teens with this disorder sometimes stop taking their medicines when they feel better. But without medicine, their symptoms usually come back.

Keeping a consistent sleep-wake schedule is an important first step in managing bipolar disorder. Set a regular sleep-wake schedule for your child, to make sure they go to bed and wake up the same time every day, even on weekends.

Accepting that your child has bipolar disorder can be hard. The disorder can be a serious, lifelong problem. Your child will need long-term treatment and will need to be watched carefully. By working with your child's doctor, you can find a treatment that works for your child.