

Faith at Home

Family Communication

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Sometimes getting a teenager to talk is harder than getting a cat to follow instructions. And when things aren't going well, talking sounds more like shouting. Nothing you say seems to register.

But it's not always that way. Just when you least expect it, your kids share something unexpected and you rediscover the joy of glancing into the world of a maturing young adult.

Facts from Search Institute

- Only 30% of middle and high school students surveyed report having positive family communication, including being willing to seek their parents' advice and counsel.
- Positive family communication is much more common among younger kids than older teenagers. While 47% of sixth graders report positive family communication, only 22% of high school seniors do.

The asset advantage

The [Developmental Assets](#) gives a framework for talking about all the "good stuff" in our kids' lives, from the people who support and care to the values and priorities that guide us. Having positive conversations about the important things in life makes it a little easier to bring up the tough topics, such as alcohol and drug use or sexual activity.

Ideas you can use every day

Stay connected

- **Talk about the everyday stuff every day** — If your kids learn they can trust you with the "little stuff," they're more likely to come to you about the "big stuff."
- **Create times for talking** — Expect everyone to have a family meal together. Turn off the music while you're driving around. Play a board game instead of watching television.
- **Be approachable** — If kids think they'll get a lecture or be judged every time they bring up an idea or a personal experience, they'll shut down. Try to listen without judging and to ask questions without accusing. Show that you understand what your children are feeling by sharing similar experiences.
- **Take concerns seriously** — Sometimes it's easy to dismiss children's concerns or worries because, from an adult perspective, they're not important. Don't; don't take them lightly, laugh at or tease them. If it's important to your children, empathize and listen. They'll

learn that they can come to you about other things—some of which you'll think are *really* important.

- **Don't wait** — You don't have to wait for an "important" conversation to have a good conversation. Find times to talk with your children every day about little stuff *and* big stuff and when you do talk, really listen to what they have to say.

Be intentional

- **Wait** — Whether they're tired or upset, sometimes your children aren't ready to talk. Give yourself and your children time and space, but don't make it an excuse to avoid conversation.
- **Listen for more than the words** — What your children are "saying" may not come out in words. It may show through body language, tone or other actions. Listen carefully and try to understand the feelings behind the words, not just the words themselves.
- **Think through the tough conversations** — Sometimes you need to have difficult conversations. When the time comes, think it through in advance. What do you want to say? What questions do you need to ask? What can you do to make it go as well as possible?

Be creative

- **Do something else** — Many people don't like "just talking." They have better conversations when they're shooting hoops, putting together a puzzle, hiking in the mountains or doing a service project together. Doing things together that both you and your children enjoy may be the best way to get a conversation going.
- **Communicate without talking** — There are lots of ways to communicate that you care besides talking. If your children don't want to talk, leave a caring note, send a friendly email or just sit by their bed and give a backrub. You won't have to say anything to communicate a lot.

Keep perspective

- **Give time** — Sometimes kids need space to work through things and figure out who they are. Give them time and space, but always let them know you're there, you care and you're ready to listen.
- **Be patient** — Sometimes you and your children will say things you regret. Other times you'll miss opportunities for a great conversation. Relax, it's perfectly normal. Despite the fact that you may already have a hard time talking, remember that you can always start a new conversation, even a simple one, that can help get you back on track. Learn. Forgive. And try again.