



How to Help Your Troubled Teen

From "[How to Help Your Troubled Teen](#)", By Holly Brown, LMFT

Many parents can see their teens floundering, but aren't sure what to do about it. They might overdo and become intrusive (which causes their children to want to push them away) or underdo (not say anything and just hope the problem goes away.) Here are some suggestions about how to walk the middle ground and emotionally connect with your teenager.

1. **Notice your own tendencies.** When you see your child struggling, what's your natural instinct? Is it to come down on your child in the form of lectures or punishment? Is it to ask a lot of leading questions? Is it to back away, maybe even to go into denial ("I'm sure everything's fine")? Seeing our children in pain and/or making poor decisions is anxiety-provoking. Think about what the anxiety prompts you to do.
2. Then **consider whether your tendencies draw your child closer**, or push him/her further away. A well-meaning parent can make it to talk too much, and listen too little. Sometimes this is prompted by anxiety, and by a sense that good parenting involves imparting wisdom. "They can learn from my experience," you might think. The problem is, your teenager wants to learn from her own experiences. When you try to impress your own perspective upon them too vigorously, they'll (understandably) resist it. Who likes to be told that their way of thinking is wrong, especially when they feel like you haven't fully listened to what it is? Or you might not approach your teenager at all for fear of what you might hear. You might want to avoid hard conversations because you're not sure you'll handle them well. You think you might do more harm than good, so it's better to watch and wait.

Evaluating what impact your tendencies have on your relationship with your child and on his/her overall well-being is important. That doesn't mean blaming yourself; it means knowing yourself, and that allows you to change course, if needed.

3. **Remember that teenagers are inconsistent creatures.** So if at first you don't succeed, try try again. Also, look at your approach and what might have been off-putting to your child. We're only human, and a wealth of emotions (fear, frustration, even resentment and anger) could be bleeding out around the edges of our communication. Your child will pick up on your non-verbal cues at least as strongly as your verbal.
4. **Attachment bonds are strong.** So even if you feel distant from your teen now, realize that

there's still an emotional attachment on which you can rely. Developmentally, teenagers are supposed to individuate and separate from us. Part of the reason they push us away so hard is because of a fundamental conflict: They still need you, even when they don't want to. Recognizing this can help you take rebuffs less personally.

5. **From an attachment perspective, your teen needs to know:** they're loved fully; they can rely on you no matter what; you will be their safe base, a life raft in the tumultuous sea of adolescence. You're there to try to understand them. This isn't the same as expressing approval for all their decisions. Sometimes you need to express concern. Just make sure that when you do, it comes after you elicit their thoughts and feelings about their situation, not before. Showing respect for a teenager who's in trouble and might be making unwise decisions is not easy. But it is crucial for your relationship, and for your ability to influence their decisions in the future.