

Talking to your family

What teenagers want to tell their parents about why they won't share

1. Maybe things aren't as bad as you think!

"Mum always wants to sit down and talk about everything, but I'm fine the way I am."

The good news is that just because your teenager is quiet doesn't mean there's something wrong. It's important not to dive in assuming that there's a problem.

For example, you'd expect teenagers not to want to talk during their favourite 'soap' on TV. Equally they may not be very forthcoming when their friends are around (it may even be considered unacceptable to get on well with your parents!).

"Mum always asks me what's wrong...normally there isn't, but then I get moody because she asked me...so it ends up with there being something wrong after all!"

And, of course, there may be fewer things that teenagers feel the need to talk about with their parents. As they get older they're forming their own ideas and opinions about all sorts of things: so what Mum and Dad think can become less important. If that's the case then knowing that you are there is often enough. Your teenager will talk to you when they need to.

Don't presume there's a problem or even that you've failed as a parent! It's quite normal for teenagers to not talk to their parents about everything.

2. Don't assume you know everything about me

"Mum thinks she knows me really well, but she doesn't. She hasn't got a clue. She doesn't know half of what I feel or think."

It's easy for parents to imagine that they know their own child. After all, they've brought them up and lived in the same house for years! But all that can change when a child becomes a teenager. Their values, ideas, opinions, even their feelings are changing all the time. One teenager put it like this:

"It really winds me up when Mum starts talking like she knows what I'm thinking. Sometimes I just want to scream at her and tell her I'm not just a smaller version of her...I've got my own personality now."

That means that parents have to constantly remember the need to find out what a teenager thinks or feels rather than assuming they know. Doing that will help a teenager feel that they are being respected as a person...and make them much more open to the possibility of talking.

Try not to use phrases like "I know you" and "I know what you're thinking". Instead, ask them your teenager they're thinking or feeling.

3. I'm not the talking type

"We've had to accept that David's is an introvert and won't say much to us...there's nothing wrong, it's just frustrating sometimes!"

Teenagers, like adults, have all kinds of different personalities and characters. None are necessarily better than the other...just different. Kevin is 14 and it feels like he can be heard 10 miles away, chatting to his friends or whoever he happens to meet. Tom is much quieter and prefers to spend time on his own. He tends to prefer to have a few really good friends whom he can trust, rather than lots of mates like Kevin.

In fact, parents could find that either teenager won't talk much to them. Kevin may end up talking a lot but actually sharing very little of what's really going on deep down. Tom may keep himself to himself too. It all depends on character and personality...neither extreme is wrong, just different. And some parents may have to accept that their child isn't the talking type.

Consider the possibility that your child is an introvert and so will not always naturally want to share their innermost thoughts and feelings. Be prepared to let them make the first move...or to choose not to share as much with you as you'd like.

4. I dare you to say sorry

"Dad never makes the first move after we've had a row: he'd rather leave it with a bad atmosphere."

One of the most common complaints from teenage children is the fact that their parents never apologise to them when they've done something wrong. Of course, teenagers aren't always that good at apologising either, but nothing seems more likely to wind them up than Mum or Dad never ever saying sorry.

"I can honestly say I can never ever remember Dad apologising to me, not even once. But he always expects me to say sorry and then gets upset when I throw a fit."

Talking with your teenager is no different to any other close relationship when it comes to saying sorry. It can often be the starting point for two people beginning to really talk and listen to each other. Many teenagers are notoriously stubborn and won't easily admit their wrong. That means parents are faced with a difficult choice: you may have to make the first move even if that feels like you are conceding ground. (even means if you know you are right!).

Be prepared to take a deep breath and say your sorry when you argue...because sometimes keeping communication going is more important than winning.

5. Less TV, more talking

"Mum only ever asks questions and nags at me, we never really talk.""

“Dad only ever talks to me when he’s telling me off for something.”

It’s easy as a parent to end up where most of your communication is telling your child off or dealing with a problem. One parent put it like this: “Sometimes it’s only when I look back at, for example, what I’ve talked about with my teenagers over the past week, that I realise how little real ‘talking’ we do.”

That’s not as easy as it might seem. Often finding the time to just ‘talk’ is the real challenge. One of the challenges is to make sure that there are times when talking is the principle activity. And that’s not just in the ad breaks on television. It may be difficult at first but in a family where conversation is encouraged teenagers are much more likely to share about what is actually important to them.

Why not buck the cultural trend and eat together as a family once in a while. Turn the TV off and start talking.

6. Why won’t you listen to me

“My mother never really listened to me, never really encouraged me to talk about how I felt, it was as if she always wanted everything dealt with quickly and efficiently. She always seemed too busy.”

“Dad’s always too tired to talk in the evenings. Sometimes I want to talk to him but I see him lying in front of the TV and decide not to bother.”

‘I have two ears and one mouth that means I should spend twice as much time listening..’ So goes the saying but how much time do parents sometimes spend actually listening to what their teenager says?

Some of the strongest advice comes from teenagers themselves who complained not about how little their parents talked to them, but that fact that, when they did, they didn’t really listen:

Let me finish sentences. Don’t cut off compliments with ‘what are you creeping for?’ Don’t always use humour or sarcasm. Don’t try and second guess what I’m about to say.

Listening doesn’t mean you have to stop doing everything when they start to talk. Sometimes it’s even easier for a teenager to share things while their Mum or Dad is doing the ironing or fixing the car.. but parents do need to be aware when the time is right to stop and give the matter their full attention.

Show that you are listening and they will be much more prepared to talk.

7. Don’t be so quick to blame me

“The moment I do something wrong, Mum starts on me. I just go all quiet and moody.”

Sometimes the way we say things can make a huge difference to how a teenager reacts. Like most of us, they'll tend to react badly to being blamed for something before they feel they've had a chance to put their point of view.

For example, take the classic line, halfway through a hectic shopping trip one Saturday: "You are never satisfied with what I get for you, you always want more." Instead, parents could try something like "I feel guilty when you tell me your friends have got new trainers because I feel that you want me to buy you some and I cannot afford them."

One parent also emphasises the importance of honesty. "Comments such as 'I wish you hadn't told me that' or 'it would have been best left unsaid' will not help to foster better communication."

The best thing parents can do is to be honest with their child. If you're angry, avoid the cliches and tell them how you're feeling and you'll be more likely to hear how their feeling.

8. Make Space

You cannot make your teenager talk to you! Banging on the bedroom door pleading to be heard is not going to suddenly transform them into non-stop talkers!

Parents need to allow time for your teenager to open up and tell them things that are important to them. That may require a lot of patience but being available is vital if you are going to improve communication. That may mean that you spend more time with them, not just in the car and shopping but actually just doing something shared.

Work to create opportunities where it will be natural to talk, like taking the time to pick them up from a sports match rather than letting them get the bus.

9. Don't talk to me now

"Mum always starts quizzing me the moment I get in the door from school. I'll literally have put a foot into the kitchen and she'll start."

There are some moments in the day which simply are not suited to asking questions! Straight after school is often pin-pointed by teenagers as the worst time. Mum may have been thinking of questions all day and as their son or daughter walks in they all spill out in a mixture of concern and interest. What Mum sometimes doesn't realise is that this is actually the worst time in the world for their child. What they want to do is collapse and watch TV to wind down, then they may be ready to talk. Sometimes parents just have to hang on and make the most of an opportunity wherever and whenever it comes.

You can't make your teenager talk, but you can make space to give them the opportunity.

10. Why don't you realise I've grown up

“I was always Dad’s little girl. That’s fine but sometimes he still treats me that. Dad’s got to accept I don’t need him for everything now.”

You only realise how difficult it is to let go when you finally have to. Dad’s, in particular, were cited by teenagers as being bad at realising their child had grown up. But it’s a vital step if you’re going to keep the lines of communication open in the coming years.

Tough but true. Sometimes it time to let go and talk to your child like their a young adult.

Side box maybe:

A word to my dad:

Don’t only talk when its about discipline or to hand out money.

Don’t leave all the talking to their Mum.

Please remember I’m not your little girl anymore.

Don’t assume that I will have the same interests as you.

You can’t buy love. Spending time with me is worth more than a thousand Dreamcast machines.

A word to my mum

Don’t fight all my battles for me.

Don’t pry. If I want you to know something, I’ll tell you.

Don’t sneak into my room to find things.

Don’t ask too many questions.

Don’t stop being a Mum. I need you to care for me even if I don’t say it much.