

## Opening the door

### The whens, wheres and hows of talking to your teen

By Janis Hashe  
Photo by Julie Hogue



**Will she or won't she?** Experts say trying to force an Important Conversation with your teen often doesn't work. Local mom Michelle Dotson, shown above with her 14-year-old daughter, Kaila, agrees: "I've found that waiting for my daughter to be open to a certain conversation can be helpful. Some days she is just more talkative than others.... I have tried the awkward conversations at dinner, and she closes up."

Communicating with teenagers can be tough, and that's normal. Every parenting book on the planet will tell you this. Still, it's worrisome when your formally open and vivacious child becomes, at least at times, a clamped-down clam. And worrying about your uncommunicative teen would also be normal.

Still, there are ways to keep the lines of communication open. To ease some of the anxiety on both sides of the line, we've talked to national and local experts, as well as Chattanooga parents, about what works: the whens, wheres and hows.

David Hooton, EdD, a local therapist and author of soon-to-be-published book *If Your Teen Could Talk*, explains that parents often don't realize three important things: "They don't understand key differences in their brains as compared to their teens' brains; there is a lack of trust that causes teens to withdraw; and they don't listen with their full attention, so they don't pick up on key issues."

"Parents forget what it is like to be a teenager," says Lori Vann, a licensed professional counselor. Every little thing is just so *huge*. And tone of voice matters. Speaking to a teen is not like speaking to a second grader."

"Don't try to be part of their world," suggests local therapist Audrey Canaff, PhD, referencing the hopelessly-trying-to-be-cool dad on the series *Modern Family*. "Instead, ask them to explain things to you. Teens love to educate you about things."

#### When: Let teens choose sometimes

Local mom Michelle Dotson says this about communicating with her 14-year-old daughter, Kaila:

"I've found that waiting for my daughter to be open to a certain conversation can be helpful. Some days she is just more talkative than others. Sometimes she will come and sit beside me, or just linger, and I try to prompt her then... I think general, fun conversations like what friend likes what boy, and jobs I think sound fun, are good dinner conversation. Talking about things going on in my life are also good ways to get her to open up.

"I have tried the awkward conversations at dinner, and she closes up. The don't-do-drugs conversations have been easiest and most effective while watching the news together, which I have on while I cook dinner. I jumped at the chance to discuss Heath Ledger's death and Britney Spears shaving her head. (She was horrified at this; she loves her hair.)

And this was a great way to start up and point out how dangerous drugs and even prescription drug use can be."

Psychologist Debra Condren, PhD, provided the following story:

"My son, Devin, now 21, and I always listened to *Morning Edition* on National Public Radio during the ride to school, which primed the conversation to cover just about everything. And the program's subject matter would often trigger personal conversations that had been lurking in the background, such as when I embarrassed him in front of his friends, sex, drugs, music, politics, and even new lunch preferences."


Says Vann, "My kids opened up more when we were doing the dishes. Doing something gave them an 'out' if the conversation became too uncomfortable."

While therapist Kris Bordessa says there isn't necessarily a "best" time to talk, she notes that there are plenty of times that aren't conducive to good two-way conversation with a teen. "Often parents are early risers and ready to tackle the day early, and begin hammering teens with questions just after they arrive in the kitchen looking for breakfast," she says. "This is *not* the best time to try to talk. Trying to broach a difficult subject with the siblings—especially younger siblings—around? *Not* the best time!"

#### A tool for talking

As a tool to help parents initiate conversation, local nonprofit On Point developed "Let's Talk Boxes," each containing 50 question cards meant to be icebreakers.

"You can pull them out in the car, at the dinner table, or whenever you have a free minute to talk," says On Point's Kathryn DeNovo Grant. "They are a fun, no-pressure way to discuss life. We've been giving these out for three years now and have had parents tell us that they started eating dinner as a family so they can discuss the questions."

In 2009, the Volunteer State Health Plan sponsored 2,000 boxes for Chattanooga families. They are available by contacting On Point at 899-9188 or visiting [LiveOnPoint.org](http://LiveOnPoint.org). 

**Where: The car, by a mile**

Many preteens and adolescents feel more talkative in the car, notes Dr. Condren. “There, many a quality conversation is jump-started, when parent and child are somehow magically freed up to talk more easily because by looking ahead, eye contact is avoided.” She recommends using drive time to or from school to practice “active, focused listening to them, with much less talking on your part. This should not turn into Advice Hour from Mom. Give them a rich, genuine form of attention. Kids love to be listened to and taken seriously—and rarely are.”

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Once that pattern for car time becomes predictable, she adds, kids will start to anticipate it. “Your teens will look forward to getting your full attention in a relaxed, comfortable, predictable setting (even though they’ll never admit to it!). This is when they can be themselves and be appreciated for it.”

Kris Bordessa agrees. “There’s something about sitting in a car, side by side, without the need to *look* at each other, that makes teens more likely to open up to their parents,” she says. “I find that when I’m driving, my kids are much more likely to broach sensitive subjects with me.”

When time is of the essence, however, the car sometimes takes a backseat to technology. “The only way I communicate with my daughter? Texting! I get the fastest response that way,” says local mom Laurie Shipley.

**How: Try listening instead of talking**

“Conversations between parents and teens should be frequent, open and honest,” says Kathryn DeNovo Grant, director of communications and community outreach for the local youth development organization On

Point. “The number-one complaint we get from teens is that adults don’t listen to them. Parents need to show their children that having a conversation with them is important.” She suggests these tips:

- Give your teen your full attention—turn off your cell phone and Blackberry.
- Have a positive attitude and be welcoming to discussions with your child.
- Be open to what your teen has to say, and don’t be judgmental.
- Avoid lecturing! This is the quickest way to make your teen tune you out.
- Have faith in your teen’s ability to make good decisions. Teens say it’s easier to make the right choice when adults truly believe that they can.

Local mom Nancy Carstens says communication with her 12-year-old daughter works best when she makes plenty of space for her daughter in the conversation. “When she has a question, I say, ‘Let’s figure that out together.’ I believe one of the mistakes parents sometimes make is just not listening—not getting the full story, not giving the teen a chance to explain. If that happens, it really helps to say, ‘I’m sorry. I should have let you finish.’”

Betty Hoeffner, president and co-founder of HeyUGLY.org, a nonprofit organization that helps teens with self-esteem issues, offers a unique way to gain insight into your teen.

“One of the best ways to communicate with teens is through music,” she says. “Find out what the teen is listening to, and then check out the lyrics. You can find most lyrics on the Internet. Select a song with lyrics that set the stage for conversation. Tell the teen you heard the song and were interested in their perspective on its meaning. What does the teen think the artist is trying to convey? Then *listen*. That is the biggest gift you can give a teen.

“Most kids report not talking with adults because they don’t listen. They interrupt and, worse, correct.”

Whatever the subject, keep guilt and drama out of the conversation, advises Lori Vann. “Anger, and comments like, ‘How could you do this to me?’ just drive the problem deeper,” she says. “Remember to love the sinner, but not the sin.” ☞

**The checklist**

Vicki Hoefle is the mother of five teens, a professional parent educator, and the founder of ParentingOnTrack.com. She provided the following terrific checklist for the whens, wheres and hows of talking to your teenager.

**When...**

1. Everyone is relaxed and there are no time constraints on the conversation.
2. You are feeling supportive instead of defensive.
3. You are more interested in hearing and learning what your child is thinking and less interested in showing them how wise and wonderful you are.
4. You can walk away from the conversation without ever saying a word.

**Where...**

1. You won’t be disturbed by anything.
2. You can move around, walk, run, skip or get distracted by nature or someone walking by.
3. Your conversation won’t be overheard.
4. You will have to keep your voice respectful.
5. People can see you if you make “parenting” faces.
6. It feels like equal turf.
7. No one can run away and hide.

**How...**

1. Ask open-ended “how” and “what” questions.
2. Steer clear of “why” questions—they are judgmental.
3. Wait 10 seconds before you respond.
4. Remember that the opening line from your child is the “floater” sentence. It will determine if they tell you anything else, so be ready to sit still and listen.
5. Enter into conversation with an open mind, an open heart, and a willingness to act like an adult and not just a parent.
6. Vow to treat your child like a thinking human being who has a right to think what they think and feel what they feel and deserves to share it without fear of punishment, humiliation or retribution from their parent. ☞

**When you might need help**

Teen moodiness and, to some degree, uncommunicativeness, is normal and a part of growing up. But when isn’t it? We asked our experts how to tell if your teen has crossed into a place where he or she may need help.

“An increase in risky behavior, drugs, drinking, cutting—this is a danger sign,” says Chattanooga therapist David Hooton, EdD. “Constant outbursts, or lots of silence, can both signal problems.”

“If you can see that your child is getting so distressed that they cannot seem to process their feelings, intervention may be indicated,” says Kris Bordessa.

“When your child is not eating or sleeping, is overly angry, has a change in friends, or seems depressed, this is the time to find out why,” says local therapist Audrey Canaff, PhD. “You might want to begin by e-mailing her teacher or contacting the school counselor to see if there has been a change in behavior at school, as well.” ☞