



# **ONTARIO ASSOCIATION FOR MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPY**

(A Division of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy)

*"Helping with life's most precious relationships"*

## Parenting Tip Sheet: Staying Connected to your Teenager

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If you are like many parents, you may find as your child enters adolescence, your teen stops listening to you or talking to you much about their life. This can be especially difficult if you are worried that your teen has withdrawn from family life into the world at large, and may be engaging in activities of which you don't approve.

It is natural for teenagers to want to spread their wings and become more active in the world. What do you do when your teen pulls away from you and you find it difficult to communicate anymore?

First, take time to reflect on what you do know about your teen through the many brief conversations you have. Teens provide lots of information about their lives. Who are their best friends? What do they enjoy doing? Don't assume your teen doesn't want you in his/her life anymore. Teens need parents now as much as when they were younger. They may have a hard time being open due to their own confusion or even fear. How will you respond if they discuss the private thoughts, beliefs and issues they themselves may find confusing? Being genuinely interested in teens and open to listening about their world when they want to communicate sends a strong message that parents want to connect with them.

Second, talk with your spouse or another person with whom you are close enough to discuss your concerns. Fear and anxiety about teens can escalate suddenly. If you lack a confidant to hear your fears before you talk to your teen, this may lead to confronting your teen while feeling stressed and anxious, which can have unintended results.

Third, have some compassion for your teen and for yourself. Take some time to remember what your own teen years were like. Odds are you will remember being less communicative with your parents. You may remember struggling with issues about school, being accepted by peers, facing pressure to use substances, or feeling embarrassed about sex and sexuality. Teens are under a barrage of influences and information about these topics, but may have very few people who truly care enough to hear their point of view.

Fourth, often it isn't what you say, but how you say it. If you find yourself getting upset or worried and this comes out as angry or confrontational, your teen will have a hard time listening to you. As you talk, check your tone of voice, your body language and your facial expressions. Your teen will "hear" these far more loudly than the verbal messages you are giving. Perhaps you can ask for time to collect your thoughts and model for your teen how to be aware of intense underlying feelings. If teens experience a parent's willingness to reveal vulnerable feelings, they too may risk this as well.

Fifth, keep in mind the primary goal is keeping a strong, loving and consistent connection with your teen. The stronger the foundation of your relationship with your teen, the more easily you will be able to weather the small storms along the way. You've already set a strong foundation in your child's earlier years. Parenting a teen is a continuation of this earlier relationship, with the added challenge of helping your teen navigate a very complex outside world.

Even though teens may not say it in so many words, they need the love and support parents provide as a template of how to be in a secure and healthy relationship as an adult. You more than anyone are uniquely qualified to provide this loving model as you, more than anyone, are invested in your teen's successful transition into young adulthood.