

Keeping Communication Open With Your Teen during COVID-19
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If you're the parent of a teenager, especially one with special needs or other challenges, you've probably noticed some major behavioral changes over the past few weeks since COVID-19 became a daily challenge for all of us. With changes in school schedules, sleep schedules and losing time with friends many teenagers are really struggling. For teens with autism and emotional challenges this can be even worse. *Although these behaviors are normal for adolescence, it's still necessary to keep the communication flowing between the two of you and work to reassure them that we are all in this together.* As an education attorney working with hundreds of families with teenagers for over twenty years I can say with certainty that communication becomes key during this time especially given the changes in their school schedules and life.

The communication methods or tips that work with one teen might not work as well with another. If your teen is already working with a therapist or other counseling professional – they may be able to add to this list. To keep conversations flowing with your teen, try some of the methods listed below to see which ones help you the most.

1. **Rather than doing the talking, focus on listening.** Professional therapists have learned that many teen clients report feeling like their parents talk "at" them and rarely listen to what their kids have to say.
 - Because some parents become disappointed about teens' withdrawal from the family, they might tend to do all the talking or even become a little "preachy" in their communication.
 - Be aware that your teens individual challenges may affect their ability to fully understand the situation or to react "normally." Some teens may react with indifference and frustration whereas others exhibit heightened anxiety responses.
 - Make sure you understand how your child's individual challenges or diagnosis may be affecting them. If possible talk to their pediatrician, psychiatrist, or therapist if you see behavior that seems really out of the ordinary. A teen with ADHD may become more hyperactive and anxious and need a reduction of medication whereas a teen with Autism may be frustrated and withdrawn.
 - *If you can de-focus from what you want to say and focus instead on listening, your teen will be more encouraged to communicate with you.*
2. **Show interests in your teen's music, books and even television shows during the quarantine time period.** Even though it most likely isn't your choice of tunes or literature, your teen's passions are ways to catch a glimpse into what's going on with him or her.
 - When she's talking about songs, her favorite performers, books, or magazines, use the discussion as a springboard to keep her communicating with you. You'll be surprised with what you learn when you demonstrate that you want to know more about what she

loves.

3. **Take advantage of time spent at home with your teen.** Many parents have more time than ever with their teenagers right now. This is a time to play games, make family dinners, and an opportunity to listen and have a meaningful exchange.

4. **Keep teens involved by allowing them choices that are safe during this time.** They may not be able to go to a friend's house, or to a party but give them some freedom to sleep late, choose movies, and have time to themselves when they need it.
 - If so, use that momentum to *encourage your teen to continue to make choices for family get-togethers and activities*. Let your teen decide what you'll have to eat at a cookout with the family.
 - Enlist your teen to help you plan Dad's or Mom's birthday dinner. Allow them to choose the movie for Family Movie Night.
 - Teens that have choices at home and are praised for their involvement are less likely to rebel and may spend more time with family.

5. **Have fun together.** Remember to joke and laugh with your teen – especially now. Watch comedies, play games, make art, have family discussions. After all, you were a teen once and can hopefully recall what it felt like – and most of us never had to deal with anything like the COVID-19 crisis.
 - Use your adolescent experience as fodder for funny stories and bonding with your teen. They'll most likely appreciate hearing your own stories about adolescence if they're told in the spirit of openness, fun, sharing, and love.

As a parent, you have the responsibility to stay connected with your adolescent. Practice these methods to encourage open communication between you and your teen. You'll be pleased at the responses you get. Keep well!!!