

Ten Tips for Talking with Teens

There's an old story from long before the Internet about a teenager whose grandparents gave her a set of encyclopedias as she entered high school. The girl's mother sent the gift back with this note, "Thank you, but Mary doesn't need these references. She already knows everything." Most people who have raised, taught, or dealt with teenagers in any capacity can relate to this story.

Adolescence can be a difficult time, for the teens themselves, as well as for those who care about them, and for good reason. Youngsters between the ages of 12 and 19 experience a "tension of opposites...between love and hate, desire and shame, hope and despair, gain and loss."¹ They struggle to acquire critical life skills, including abstract thinking, coping, establishing personal identities, defining moral and ethical standards, and changing the way that they relate with adults.

Teens are drawn by both the safety and comfort of childhood and the independence but uncertainty of adulthood, and the ensuing struggle can make for turbulent times. So, communication with them can often be challenging. Here are a few tips to help the process.

1 Listen

The number one complaint of dental patients is that we don't listen to them. Adolescents in particular need to feel heard. Listening demonstrates respect, can help teens feel more at ease, and can also be a path to a deeper understanding of their issues. Sometimes getting a teen to talk is as much of a challenge as getting him to listen, but if you listen first, you are more likely to obtain the information and the cooperation that you need.

We have all learned the "tell-show-do" approach to patient education. I offer the "listen-tell-show-do" approach. In other words, find out where teens are in terms of oral health and other concerns, and then communicate from that point of view. Once you listen to their issues, they may be more inclined to listen to you – or not. But it's certainly worth a try.

2 Establish rapport and trust

Begin by spending some social time with teens and their parents. Roll out the red carpet. Shake hands. Show

that you sincerely like them. Take some time to engage in conversation, especially with new patients. Get to know them at a casual level, and let them get to know you. It is difficult to find time for a conversation in a busy clinical day, but the investment will pay off for years to come.

As with every patient, it's all about the relationship. Try to draw out personal information. Regardless of attitude, teens want to be understood. Ask questions about interests and activities, school, aspirations, friends, or even just the meaning of their slang terms. Ask them how to use that new application on your smart phone. Chances are, they'll know, and they'll feel good about knowing and appreciate having been asked.

Gaining trust from teens can be tricky. They may trust you immediately, over months and years, or never at all. Continue to make the effort.

3 Maintain confidentiality and privacy

Assure confidentiality as much as is legally possible. We can touch on some very delicate health and personal information during our conversations with teens, and they want to know that the information will be kept private. They will not talk with us and may even avoid care if it isn't. On the other hand, we can walk some fine legal lines among patient confidentiality, parent's rights, and reporting requirements. As practitioners we must remain current with legal requirements in the appropriate states.¹ However, we can be partly reassured by this quote, "Confidentiality in adolescent medicine is supported by all major adolescent health care organizations and is protected by law in varying forms across all 50 states and the District of Columbia."²

4 Involve the parents

Of course parents must be involved in decisions about their children's care. They can be strong allies in our efforts to lead teens to higher levels of health, so determine both the patient's and the parents' expectations. Sometimes this can be difficult. Remain neutral during parent and child confrontations, and use judgment to decide whether or not to try to mediate between them.



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5 Allow control

Give the teen as much control and the opportunity to make as many choices as possible. The two things that adolescents fear the most are embarrassment and loss of control. Most teens want truthful information. Explain what they can expect during and after procedures. Teens are more likely to respond to adult help that is offered sincerely and without an expectation of control.

6 Reserve judgment

Take the teen's concerns seriously. Try to stifle your assumptions and reserve judgment about teens, regardless of dress, attitude, grooming, oral health, or other verbal or nonverbal messages that they may send. Maintain a conversational tone and empathize with their issues.

Do not express personal disappointment at their shortcomings, which invites feelings of shame. Just ask, matter-of-factly, "What's going on with your mouth?" or simply, "What happened?" Then ask for their involvement, "Can you think of ways to help you remember to brush your teeth?" Focus on the positive. Notice what the teen is doing right first and do not lecture.

7 Remain immediate and positive

Stay in the moment and stay positive. Adolescents have difficulty seeing too far ahead, so motivate with immediate consequences and focus on positive rather than negative outcomes. "With good care, your red gums can become healthy and pink within a few days. Imagine how beautiful your smile will be then."

8 Consider culture

Adolescents as a group are becoming more and more diverse, and white adolescents are projected to be in the minority nationally by the year 2040. California has not had a racial majority in its population since 1999. Teens who were born in this country to immigrant parents, or who came to the United States as young children, may speak and appear the same as most other American teens. However, they often feel a stronger tug between teen peers and family cultures compared with other adolescents. Cultural and family ideas about the causes and treatments of health problems can be different from those in Western medicine.

"Health care providers working with children may be accustomed to issues unique to adolescents; however, differences related to culture may pose challenges that are less familiar and yet have broad and complex implications for health care."³ So, be aware of the possible added influence of culture on teens and attend to

cultural issues if necessary. If your office serves a particular cultural group, spend some time to learn about their health beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions.

9 Be the professional

Remain the adult professional. Do not try to try to be a buddy or impress them with your knowledge of the teen culture. They have friends. They need healthcare providers to guide and mentor them.

10 Highlight important points

At the end of the appointment, summarize what you have done and said, what the patient needs to do, and, most importantly, reiterate why she needs to do it. Keep it simple and focus on the most significant one or two issues. Try not to overwhelm with too much information.

Conclusion

Teens prefer healthcare providers who listen, reserve judgment, and maintain their privacy and confidentiality. They want to know that we sincerely like and care about them. Maybe, once they come to trust us, they will realize that they really don't know everything!

About the Author

Toni S. Adams, RDH, MA, practiced clinical dental hygiene for 26 years before returning to school to earn advanced degrees in communication studies. Toni speaks and writes about communication issues in healthcare and currently serves on the editorial advisory boards of *DentalLearning.net* and the *CDHA Journal*. Her *Dental Communication Brief Book Series* was published in 2011. Toni welcomes questions, comments and book orders at tonisadamsrdh@earthlink.net.



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