



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 64

"Staying Connected to Your Teen"

"We need to rethink the old metaphor of separating from our teens and replace it with the concept of extension. That is, during adolescence, teenagers need to extend away from their parents, all the while staying connected to their parents. Their job is to extend; your job is to connect." - Michael Riera

In the United States, we often make a cultural presumption that teens and young adults who are close to their parents are less independent in their lives. That's not true, says recent research. In fact, young adults who feel they can share honestly with their parents say they feel free to make independent decisions and don't feel the need to rebel against their parents' expectations. *(See research citation at end of article.)*¹

Our job as parents is to meet our kids' emotional needs at each stage of their development so they can advance to the demands of the next stage. In the teen years, everything we've done right and wrong comes into sharp focus. If we've accepted our child's dependency needs AND affirmed her development into her own separate person, she'll stay connected to us even as her focus shifts to peers, high school and the passions that make her soul sing.

It's appropriate for kids to become increasingly independent throughout their teen years. But it's critical, for most of those years, for parents to remain their teen's emotional and moral compass. Kids will begin to experiment with intimate relationships outside the family, but to do that successfully, they still rely on those intimate relationships at home remaining solid.

We need to invite our children to rely on us emotionally until they're emotionally ready to depend on themselves. Too often, in our culture, we let teenagers transfer their dependency outside the family, with disastrous results. Teens often give up a great deal of themselves in pursuit of the closeness they crave, only to crash against the hard reality that other teens aren't developmentally able to offer them what they need.

The biggest predictor of how early your child will become sexually active? The closer she is to you and her other parent, the longer she'll wait.

It is NOT a sign of healthy emotional development for a teen to push parents away, or for parents to let him. That's a sign of a damaged relationship. Attempting to parent when your relationship with your teen is damaged is like pushing a boulder uphill. It's never too late in your relationship with your child to do repair work, to move closer. But it's a whole lot harder to build the strong connection you want if the foundation isn't there.

How can you stay connected to your teen?

1. Recognize that your teen's fierce need for independence doesn't mean he can't stay connected to you.

If you can let your teen exercise his own judgment and be himself, rather than who you want him to be, he'll be able to grow into age-appropriate independence without cutting you off. If, on the other hand, you insist that he play the sport you love or that she agree with your political views, your teen will have to choose between a relationship with you and his or her integrity.

2. Listen. Empathize. Keep advice to a minimum.

It doesn't matter how good your advice is. Every time you offer it, you're giving your teen the message that he can't solve his problems himself. Be a sounding board, not a prescriber, and you'll find your teen coming back for more.

3. Be available when your teen wants to talk.

For most teens, that means late at night over a snack. It's worth a nap, and even setting your alarm for 1am. You'll be amazed at how much more your teen will open up in the wee hours. Most kids don't keep an agenda and bring things up at a scheduled meeting. And nothing makes them clam up faster than pressing them to talk. Kids talk when something is up for them, particularly if you've proven yourself to be a good listener, but not overly attached to their opening up to you. (If you push them to open up, they feel they have to defend their independence by keeping secrets from you.) Find ways to be in proximity where you're both potentially available, without it seeming like a demand. This may seem obvious, but stating your availability invites contact that might not otherwise occur:

"I'll be in the study working if you want me" or "I have to run to the grocery store, but don't hesitate to call my cell phone if you need me."

The most important part of staying available is your state of mind. Your child will sense your emotional availability. Parents who have close relationships with their teens often say that as their child has gotten older, they've made it a practice to drop everything else if their teen signals a desire to talk. This can be difficult if you're also handling a demanding job and other responsibilities, of course. But kids who feel that other things are more important to their parents often look elsewhere when they're emotionally needy. And that's our loss, as much as theirs.

4. Don't try to remake your teen.

Your teen is still learning the rules of grooming, and experimenting with new identities almost weekly. Think she'd look better with her hair off her face? Think he should wash his face more? Be sure any suggestions are made tactfully, and only once. After that, your teen will perceive them as rejection.

5. Welcome your teen's friends.

You want her hanging out at your house, right? Keep snacks available and greet her friends with a smile when they pile in unexpectedly.

6. Keep track of the "goodwill balance" in your relationship with your teen and fill it with warm interactions as necessary.

Scientists have found a way to predict which couples will end up divorcing: those who don't insure that they have at least 5 positive interactions for every negative one. It turns out that maintaining this 5 to 1 ratio is effective insurance to stay connected in every relationship, including between parents and teens.

Try as we might, all of us sometimes have less than optimal interactions with our children. Remember that each one of those interactions that leave anyone feeling bad require five positive interactions to restore a positive valence to the relationship. These can be little – a smile or pat on the shoulder – as long as you make sure they have a positive impact.

One caution -- don't be tempted to buy five presents, even if you goofed royally. Occasional gifts for no reason are fine, but all kids distinguish between emotional connection and things, and they always notice when parents use money to buy their goodwill. They won't turn down the gifts, but it's a net loss to the relationship's emotional bank account.

7. Don't take it personally.

Your teenager slams the door to her bedroom, screaming, *I hate you, you never understand!* **What's the most important thing to remember?** DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY! This isn't primarily about you, it's about them: their tangled up feelings, their difficulty controlling themselves, their immature ability to understand and express

their emotions. Taking it personally wounds you, which means you do what we all do when hurt: either close off, or lash out, or both. Which just worsens a tough situation for all concerned.

Remembering not to take it personally means you:

- Take a deep breath
- Let the hurt go
- Remind yourself that your child does in fact love you but can't get in touch with it at the moment
- Consciously lower your voice
- Try hard to remember what it feels like to be a kid who is upset and over-reacting.
- Think through how to respond calmly and constructively.

You still set limits, of course, but try to do it from as calm a place as you can muster. Your child will be deeply grateful, even if she can't acknowledge it at the moment. I'm not suggesting that you let your child treat you disrespectfully. I'm suggesting you act out of love, rather than anger, as you set limits, and that you acknowledge her upset before you demand respect.

When he was little, you learned to "connect before you correct." That's still a helpful guideline. So try starting with *"Ouch! You must be so upset to speak to me that way. What's the matter?"* No, you aren't giving him license to be rude. You made it clear that his tone or words were hurtful. But you also made it clear that you understand he's upset, and you're willing to be there to help, no matter what. That's the definition of effective "attunement" (according to relationship researcher John Gottman.) Your child will feel heard and valued. And once he feels better, if you've been modeling how to apologize and repair, he'll find a way to apologize to you and repair the relationship.

What if you're too angry to get in touch with your love at the moment? Wait to set limits until you're calm and able to feel love and empathy for your child.

8. Place a premium on relationships in your family by spending some time together every single day.

Whether it's five minutes at bedtime or washing the dishes together after dinner, make sure you have time to connect with your teen every day. If your teen is resistant to spending time with you, develop routines where you share something that your teen enjoys doing: play a game of ping pong or have a cup of tea together every night, take a walk for ice cream on Monday evenings, make brunch together or play some basketball on Sunday mornings. Kids often wait for these routine times with their parents to bring up something that's bothering them. Don't expect your son or daughter to invite closeness or volunteer vulnerable emotions at each interaction, or when you expect it. But if you set up enough regular opportunities to be together, it will happen.

9. If you don't get the response you want to your overtures towards your child, step back and watch how you initiate.

Are you inviting a positive response? Kids have a lot on their minds, from the history test to the soccer tryouts to the newest computer game. Not to mention that by the time they're tweens they're swamped with hormones, and evaluating themselves in every mirror they pass. Parents can be dismally low on their list.

So find ways to get in their face in a friendly, inoffensive way. It's fine to demand and expect connection – you have a right to a relationship with your child. But you're more likely to find the response you want if you can help your child remember why she likes you!

"I was hoping we could go out for brunch one day this weekend for some special Mom and Alice time" will work a lot better than "You never tell me anything these days!"

10. When we recollect our teens physically into our orbit, we need to recollect them emotionally as well.

Life, with its infinite distractions and constant separations, has a way of eroding connection. While our teens are separated from us, they orient themselves around other things: their peers, their team, their computer. All parents need to repeatedly reconnect with their teens, just to repair the daily erosion created by life's normal separations and distractions. Effective parenting is almost impossible until the positive connection with your child has been re-established, so think of this as preventive maintenance, before there's a problem.

If your expectation is that re-connecting after time apart is an important part of life, your teens will share that expectation. Demand your teen's attention in an inoffensive way, with a light touch, and don't take any disinterest personally. Once they get used to the routine of reconnecting after separation, they'll take it for granted.

11. Acknowledge separations and reunions.

When you or your teen leaves, say goodbye. When you return, say hello. When you first see your teen in the morning, make a point of greeting him, preferably with a hug. This may seem obvious, but lots of families don't do it. Research shows that men who hug their wives goodbye in the morning live longer, earn more, and are happier. While there is no data yet on how this applies to parents and kids, you can bet I hug my teens, as well as my husband, goodbye. (Of course, I may make an exception if their friends are present, but often the friends get hugs too!)

12. When you physically reconnect, consciously refocus your attention.

Otherwise, it's automatic for all of us to keep thinking about the meeting we just attended or what we need to pick up at the grocery store. Teens are often ready to talk when they first get in the car, but the minute they sit down at their computer, connecting with parents is the last thing they want to do.

13. Until you've re-established the connection, keep distractions to a minimum.

This may seem obvious, but if you can make yourself turn off the news when your teen gets in the car, you're lots more likely to make a connection with him and hear about what happened at band practice. If she's coming back from a sleepover, try to avoid having family friends over at the same time. Insist that she spend some time interacting with the family before she gets on the phone or computer to chat with her friends. When one of you arrives home, don't answer the phone during your greeting, even if it was a routine separation. As automatic as it is to answer the phone or check that text, greeting each other and reconnecting is ultimately more important. That's what voice mail is for. And you never want to model that an incoming text is more important than the person you're with physically.

14. Attune to your teen's mood.

Your moods are unlikely to be in sync after time apart. To re-connect, you will probably need to adjust your mood to your teen's. If you come on bubbly when he's pensive, you'll be met with stony silence.

15. Welcome your teen's expressions of dependence.

Your teen is constantly squashing his dependency needs so that he can function independently in a demanding environment. Your presence, with all of its comforting reassurance and warmth, signals to him that he can relax and let down his guard. Expect him to act childish sometimes at home, and don't be afraid of coddling him a little. You're not "encouraging dependency." You're "allowing" the dependency that is there anyway, and will otherwise go undercover. Don't worry, your teen won't be dependent forever.

16. In addition to daily preventive maintenance, do repair work as necessary.

If your teen's attachment needs have gone unmet, for whatever reason, he or she has probably turned to the peer group to try to get them filled. Parenting becomes impossible when you aren't your child's "secure base," as the attachment theorists say. You'll need to do some relationship repair work to get your child's attachment focused back on you where it belongs. Don't attempt much discipline until your relationship is on a better footing, when your teen will want to cooperate to please you.

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