



Strengthening the Connection With Your Teen

Karen Young

STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTION WITH YOUR TEEN

Adolescence is an adventure – a brilliant, trying, beautiful, confusing, crazy adventure.

From about age 12 to 24, the rate of growth and development will be faster for adolescents than at any other period of their lives. It can be a difficult time and a wonderful time, all wrapped up in the same bundle.

By understanding the changes and by being a strong, nurturing, loving presence, your adolescent will thrive.

You might notice that they will be more creative, more resistant, funnier, more intense emotionally and more driven to seek out new experiences and connections with others.

All of this is normal. It is so normal, in fact, that fighting the changes will likely cause trouble for everyone in the way of arguing, disconnection, tears, disrespect and secrecy. You'll be another one who 'just doesn't get it' and what teens need more than anything during this time of their lives is someone who 'gets it' – an adult who is invested in them, committed to them, and ready to hold a lamplight when it's needed to guide their way through.

The more you can support them and be there for them as the changes unfold, rather than fight against those changes, the more they will be open to your influence, your direction, your guidance and your love – and the stronger your connection will be.

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen² -

Their Time to Discover, Connect, Feel, Flourish.

This is the time for adolescents to establish themselves as their own people – separate to, but part of a family, connected to but independent from their parents. It's not easy but with your support, they will not only survive this challenging stage of their lives, they will thrive.

It is likely that they will discover fears, self-doubt, disappointment, and heartache, all of which they never knew existed. Know that this is normal and completely okay, even though it may unsettle you to watch them having to deal with it. These challenges will give way to the wonder, growth and phenomenal self-discovery of adolescence.

During adolescence, teens will also discover strength they never knew they had, a depth of emotion never known to them before, the richness of their capacity to connect, a mind that is beautiful, bold, independent and curious, and the power of their own presence, mind and voice.

They will find new and exciting ways of looking at things. They will challenge, question and grow their own view of the world and themselves.

Adolescence can be a challenging, wonderful, confusing time for everyone involved. Your relationship with your teen won't be the same when you both come out of it as was when you both went into it, but that's the thing about adolescence – it's a time of growth, not only for teens but also for the adults who love them.

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen³ -

Here are some powerful ways to help teens be the best version of themselves that they can be, and at the same time keep your relationship with them close, strong and everything else that's important to both of you.

1. Fighting with them (for them) sometimes means standing still.

Fighting for what you believe sometimes has less to do with pushing forward and everything to do with standing still – not in acquiescence, but to hold firm. Sometimes it's about letting the arguments and high emotion wash over to somewhere behind you, so that you can see the issues for what they are, free from the noise and clamor that go with needing to be right.

When teens are in high emotion and seem out of control, chances are that, in that moment at least, that's how they are feeling about the world around them – as though everything is out of their control. Feeling disempowered is an awful thing to feel for anyone and understanding this will make it easier for you to respond, rather than react.

Be the predictable, calm, strong, loving presence when their world feels anything but. That doesn't mean you have to tolerate disrespect – absolutely you don't.

Be clear, steady, calm and strong, but don't push against them, especially when they are emotional. It will only make things worse and you won't be heard in that space anyway. Just wait until the heat leaves the situation, then talk, listen, and respond.

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen⁴

When dealing with an angry teenager – especially when he or she is angry with you – it can be tempting to become angry yourself. This is the best way to escalate the situation and it will never end well. In fact, our IQ drops about 30 percent when we're angry, so as far as good decisions and reasoning goes, well, they're gone, at least until things calm down.

If you lose it once in a while then you can breathe a heavy sigh of relief knowing that you're normal. Here is something to try instead.

1. Say how you feel ('I'm starting to get upset. How about we talk about this later'.)
2. Listen. ('I understand what you're saying'.)
3. Acknowledge and reflect back the feelings you see, what's happened and the way your teen is seeing things. ('So just to make sure I have this right. Are you saying that ...?')
4. Let them know that you're behind them (even if you don't necessarily agree with them). ('I'm on your team remember.')
5. Give them the final say. Let them know that it's not about winning the argument. ('Let's stop talking about it for now, but how about you have the final word. What do you want me to know most of all?')

2. **Being heard is more important than being right.**

Being right counts for little if you're not being heard. Hearing your teen and making sure he or she feels heard is critical if you want your advice to be considered.

Hear what they think, what they want and why it is important to them. Be open to their influence and don't be afraid to change your mind once you've heard everything they have to say. Sometimes of course, after hearing what they have to say, you'll be even more convinced that your decision is the right one.

When your teen feels fully heard, it's more likely that he or she will be able to trust that whatever advice you're giving, or whatever decision you're making, you're doing it fully informed and with all of their needs considered. And we all need that.

3. **They will use the line between childhood and adulthood as a jump-rope.**

Teens will use the line between childhood and adulthood as a jump-rope for a while and really, it can be no other way.

Problems crop up when there is disagreement about which side of the line they should be acting from. They'll want their independence – you'll want some control. You'll want to see them starting to take responsibility – they won't be ready to take it on yet. See – so confusing!

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen⁶

Teens will have to make adult decisions long before they have their adult minds. The pre-frontal cortex - the part of the brain that is responsible for reasoning and problem-solving - will be the last to mature.

In the meantime, a more instinctive part of the brain – the amygdala - will have a heavy hand in their decision-making and impulse control. The amygdala is primitive, instinctive and reactive. It's more a doer than a thinker - geared towards action without a lot of thought.

This is why a lot of your teen's behavior won't make any sense at all – they will be acting automatically, from instinct – as will their peers, and as you were at their age. Keep this in mind when they do those things that baffle you. At times they will baffle them too.

Be patient and give them what they need – information, guidance and support – to feel confident enough to do what they need to do.

Make it easy for them to admit that they might have got it wrong. That means holding back from the 'I told you so's,' and anything that might cause them to feel shame or as though they are being judged. Judgment and shame will only lead to alienation, disconnection and a reluctance to explore their edges and find the extraordinary things they are capable of.

Part of growing up means finding the limits of what they thinks they are capable of and then stretching a little beyond. For this, your teen will need courage to push beyond those

limits and a warm, safe, non-judgmental place to come back to if things don't work as expected.

Sometimes things look obvious to us but from the midst of the adolescent jungle, it might not be that simple.

4. Separate them from their behavior. It's not a package deal .

Your teen will always be more than his or her questionable behavior.

The critical mistake is believing that to reject their bad behavior, you have to reject them too.

Separate your teen from his or her behavior ('I don't understand what you're getting out of doing that but I know you've probably got a good reason. What I also know is there's a safer/better/more appropriate way to get what you need. But first you have to figure out what it is that you need. Do you want to talk about that?')

5. It's your job to give them freedom. It's their job to prove that they can be trusted with it.

It is up to you as the adult in their lives who love them to support their move towards independence. One of the ways you can do this is by granting them more freedom. Your teen will be trying to separate from you in order to establish his or her own identity. This is an important

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen⁸

developmental role. They will be trying to do this in such a way as to preserve the relationship with you. It won't always work out this way – they will sometimes act from instinct and won't make the best decisions – even when their intentions are good ones.

Give them the space and the freedom to find who they are. Remind them that you understand the importance of trusting them with more freedom and that in return, it's their job to prove that they can be trusted with that freedom.

Let them know that the more you can trust them, the more freedom you can give them, so it's in their best interests to do the right thing.

It's a fine line – it's important to give them the space to do what they need to do as part of their growing up, but it's also important to stay connected and involved enough to keep them safe. There are a few ways this can be achieved. Ask them to:

- always be where they say they are going to be. If the plan changes, ask them to let you know, mainly for their own safety. If they let you know, be grateful and if it's not going to do harm, be okay with it.
- make sure they are always contactable. Ask them to leave their phone on and to always be responsive to your texts, missed calls or messages. In return, agree to only contact them if you need to. Give them the space to do what they need to do.

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen⁹

- let them know that their honesty is one of the most important things to you. Don't just tell them, show them. When they are honest with you, be understanding rather than reactive. If they have chosen to be honest rather than hide something from you, they have taken a risk. Let the risk be worth it for them – it is an opportunity to solidify your connection and few things are more important than that. Let the reward for their honesty be a lighter consequence, or perhaps no consequence at all. Often, for them, knowing that they have disappointed you will be enough.

Avoid enforcing any consequence or punishment that is shaming. Shame will teach them to behave in such a way as to avoid punishment but it won't necessarily teach a lesson. It will also teach them to avoid being honest with you.

One of the most important things for your relationship with your teen, and for their safety, is that they are honest and open with you. This is less likely to happen if there are harsh consequences when they tell the truth or when they open up.

They will often learn the lesson more by talking with you than by anything you can measure out.

6. Understand the need behind the behaviour.

During adolescence your teen might be defiant, test the limits, experiment, engage in risky behavior, withdraw and show hostility. The obvious response might be to come down heavily on their behavior, and many times that's what might

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen¹⁰

be deserved, but it won't necessarily lead to the best outcome.

People only do what works. You, me, everyone on the planet – everything we do is to meet a need on some level. That doesn't mean it always works well – many times it doesn't.

Dealing with the behavior without understanding the need the behavior is feeding (albeit badly perhaps) will leave a gaping hole in the form of an unmet need that will continue to press for fulfillment.

Perhaps your teen is spending too much time on the computer and not enough on schoolwork. Perhaps you've caught him or her experimenting with drugs or alcohol. Perhaps they become hostile every time you disagree. All of this behavior is less than ideal, but it's all meeting a need.

The behavior might be dysfunctional but the need never is. Some common needs and the way they might be met are:

- the need to escape from the world for a while (they might try to meet this need by spending too much time online, in their rooms, avoiding homework and avoiding responsibility);
- the need for approval (they might fall into a crowd that gives them somewhere to belong, helps them establish an identity or independence from the family or makes them feel important);
- the need to feel independent from you (they might

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen¹¹ -

push against you by arguing, being hostile, or being defiant).

- the need for social connection (they might put their friends before family - in terms of where they invest time, energy and affection);
- the need to explore the world in novel ways (they might try new things, take risks, and be tempted to experiment with drugs, alcohol and sex).

These are all valid needs, even if they are calling on outstandingly messy ways to meet them. If your teen behaves badly, look behind the behavior for the need he or she is trying to meet.

Teens don't go out of their way to upset you though it can feel like that sometimes. Your teen wants to be loved by you, approved by you and connected with you. They know it's not in their interest to alienate you. Sometimes though, the need they will be trying to meet will push harder than their need for your approval.

That's why they will sometimes do those things that they know will land them in a red hot mess with you. Let them know that while you don't approve of their behavior, you suspect that they have a really good reason for doing what they have done.

If you have some ideas, throw them out there, but also make it clear that they don't have to agree with your assessment of the problem. Make way for them to figure it out for

themselves, but the most important thing is to make it safe for them to come to you for guidance, validation and support along the way.

7. Don't ask why. Ask what.

You'll want to know what your teen is getting from doing the crazy stuff he or she is doing. Asking 'why' can lead to a fruitless 'I don't know,' – because they probably doesn't even know the answer themselves. If, on the other hand, you ask them what happens to them or for them when they do what they do, you're on track to getting answers.

What happens to them – physically, emotionally? What do they think about? What do they stop thinking about? What difficult feelings or intrusive thoughts go away when they do whatever it is they're doing? This is where you'll find your answer.

8. Remove the shame.

Adolescence is a time when shame seems to tag along like it has nowhere else to be. There are plenty of sources:

- social ('I'm different.' 'I don't fit in.' 'I'm not as popular as everyone else.');
- self image ('I'm fat.' 'I'm ugly.' 'I hate my hair/eyes/legs/the way I blink.');
- self identity ('I'm the only one who doesn't have it figured out.' 'I don't know where I fit in.' 'I want to be

independent but I don't know how to do that.' 'I should feel like an adult but I don't.);

- school ('I'm not smart enough.');
- family ('I'm such a disappointment.')

One of the reasons we all behave in socially acceptable ways is to avoid shame, so a little bit helps to keep us all on track. Too much though, will fall them. The more you can build your teen up, the more chance you will have of protecting him or her from the shame that hurts and debilitates.

They might not always let you know, but you have a lot of power and your response to them plays a huge role in buffering them from the shame that could potentially break them.

9. Validate the need. Reject the Behavior.

Behind even the most bewildering, infuriating behavior, is a need that deserves to be met. 'I get that the world is asking a lot of you right now and it's probably really tempting to want to hide away from it. I really get that. But spending hours on the internet isn't the way to do it.'

10. Find a different way to meet the need.

Your teen might need your help with this and it might take a while and a few discussions to sort this out. You're trying to replace a behavior that isn't working, not the need that it's meeting.

Be patient. The answer is there, in them, but they might need time and some help from you, or perhaps some space, to flesh it out.

11. Let the values drive the behavior – yours and theirs.

The values you want to teach are even more important than the behavior you want to teach, because if you get the values right, the behavior will fall into place on its own. Decide which values are important to you then let them shape your responses to your teen. Some of the big ones are respect, honesty, kindness and integrity.

Let's say, for example, that honesty is the value you want to teach. If you find out that your teen has lied about a mark he or she received on an assignment, let them know that the dishonesty is what has disappointed you, not the low grade.

Low grades happen and you can deal with that, but lying about it undermines your relationship, your trust in them and the amount of freedom you feel they can deal with. Let your response be to the lie, not to the low grade.

Similarly, if you find out that they are somewhere different to where they said they would be, be understanding of the fact that plans can change, but let them know that what's disappointed you is that fact that they have kept this from you.

If your teen has been honest and told you that he or she has ended up somewhere different to where you originally told, be understanding and grateful and heap approval onto them for this. If the place they have ended up is somewhere less than ideal, talk to them about that, but don't punish them for it.

Strengthening Your Connection With Your Teen¹⁵ -

The have trusted you to deal with the information they have given you, so deal with it compassionately and with grace and understanding. Show them what their honesty means to you.

And Finally ...

Make it easy for them to learn the lessons they need to learn.

They won't learn respect from you if you yell and direct more than you listen.

They won't be honest with you if it always gets them into trouble.

They won't learn kindness and compassion if they always feel judged.

They won't be open to being wrong sometimes if you never acknowledge when you are.

Let them know when they are getting it right because whether they let you know it or not, your approval means a lot. And remember that adolescence is a time of discovery, growth and learning – for both of you.