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3 Tips to Improve Communication with Your Youth & Young Adults

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Authors	Family Advisory Board & Young Adult Advisory Board, Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research
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3 Tips to Improve Communication with Your Youth & Young Adults

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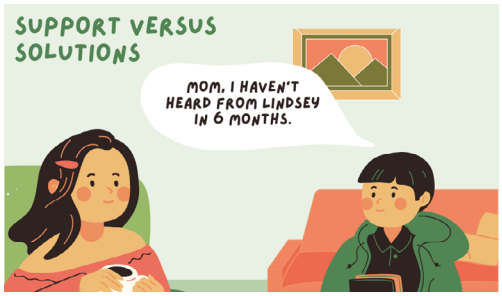
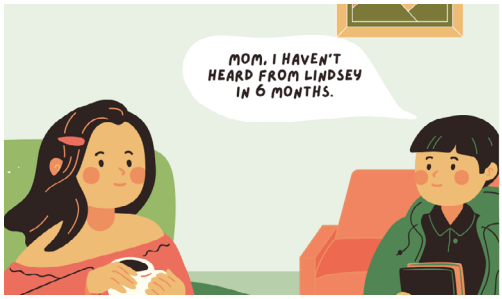
It can be hard for parents or guardians of youth and young adults (ages 14–26) to connect with the young people they care for. Creating a relationship through casual conversation can help to foster trust and open dialogue between a parent or guardian and the young person they want to connect with. By building this relationship, it can open the door for a young person to go to the parent or guardian when they have concerns or need advice. This tip sheet was developed as a collaboration between the family member and young adult advisory boards that work with the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research. The tips are based on advisory board members' real experiences.

TIP 1 Understand SUPPORT vs. SOLUTIONS

DON'T
OFFER SOLUTIONS



DO
OFFER SUPPORT



When your young adult comes to you with a problem they are having, you may think, "Here's my chance to be a great parent and help them fix their problems." But before jumping in to solve their problem, remember that sometimes your job is to simply listen, acknowledge that you heard them and show empathy. Sometimes your young adult doesn't need or want advice, they just want to vent.

> "Sometimes I just need support. Sometimes I need guidance and solutions but I will tell my parents that. Some parents are fixers and press to the point where their teen will shut down. I can usually arrive at a solution myself if I have a chance to talk out loud to someone."
>
> *— Young Adult Advisory Board (YAB) Member*

> "Parents - please listen to understand me. Don't listen to respond. When parents say 'You should do this and that' it causes STRESS. Use this as a time to learn about your kid." *— YAB Member*

Your role as a parent:

- Ask, "Do you want me to just listen, or do you want my advice too?" Let them respond and then respect their answer.
- Don't feel the need to "teach a new lesson" or solve a problem unless given permission. This often shuts down a young adult and turns off open communication. Listening can be enough.

TIP 2 Have "Goodwill" conversations 80–90% of the time.

"Goodwill Conversations" have no agenda and can help strengthen your relationship. The topics can be varied but the focus is not your child nor your relationship.

> "Goodwill/No Agenda Conversations are 'deposits' into the relationship bank."
>
> *— Family Advisory Board (FAB) Member*

- These conversations are not about "them" and so defensiveness, anxiety, annoyance and all these common feelings are minimized.
- Have "goodwill" conversations through everyday life.

Take opportunities for one-on-one non-threatening conversations, like discussing a favorite podcast on the drive to school or recipes you want to try while cooking dinner.

Be curious. Ask opinions about things that are not related to them, like a local news story, sports teams, upcoming events, funny memes.

Be a "curious anthropologist" and listen without the need to say anything other than "Well, that's interesting" or "Tell me more."

> I asked my teen to explain a meme to me and it generated so much laughter on their part. I think they felt sorry for me, but also found me kind of 'cute' for asking. It definitely increased the good will between us"
>
> *— FAB Member*

- Find "family time" activities like watching a show together, Tuesday pizza night, or a shared hobby.
- Parents also can build connections with their young adults by having no conversation at all. Sometimes your young adult isn't in a place where they want to talk. Just being together can be a way to build a good relationship.

> Try and be present to "what-is" with your young adult in the moment. Sometimes you have to be open and not have any agenda at all, and just be willing to meet them where they are at. That may be sitting quietly in the same room with no conversation."
>
> *— FAB Member*

TIP 3 Keep "Problem Solving Conversations" to 10–20% of your talk time.

Problem Solving Conversations: These conversations have an agenda of forward progress on a specific issue.

- Many parents have a running agenda of issues they want to resolve with their young adult. But try and keep these "problem solving" conversations to only 10-20% of your time with your young adult.

TIP 3 CONT.

Keep "Problem Solving Conversations" to 10–20% of your talk time.

These types of conversations may cover topics like:

- Employment, school grades, concerns about unhealthy behaviors, chores, concerns about friend choices.

When you have a problem you'd like resolved:

- Your role as a parent is to pay attention, be an active listener, be in control of your own feelings, direct the conversation but know when to step back, and make sure your YA doesn't feel "double-teamed" if you are there with a partner.

FAB Member Tip: "Take a few minutes before a potentially difficult conversation — set calm intentions, get centered and grounded."

"I always am anxious getting into the car with my mom. I'm afraid she's going to bring up something I don't want to talk about and I feel trapped"
— Young Adult

- It helps to begin with a request for a conversation and/or a timeframe. "I have something I'm struggling with that I want to talk with you about. It should only take 10 minutes. Can we talk now?"
- A car ride may be a great place for "goodwill conversations" but is not a good place for problem solving conversations (unless initiated by your young adult).
- Collaborate — Involve your young adult with identifying problem and solution and be consistent. Ask what they need and involve them in defining the problem.
- Support good ideas.
- Assume neutral intent and stay neutral if you can. If emotions get too intense, your young adult may shut down.

FAB Member Tip: "Remember to attack the problem, not each other and validate the feelings not necessarily the actions."

- Let your young adult know you want to understand what is going on for them when appropriate.

Resources

AMP's Top Ten Tips for Engaging with Young People
https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/proj-5-AMP-top-ten-tips-for-engaging-young-people.pdf

How to Negotiate With Your Family Without Hurting the Relationship at All
https://www.lifehack.org/606160/how-to-negotiate-with-your-family-without-hurting-the-relationship-at-all

When Texting Your Teen, Follow These Four (Not So) Simple Rules
https://grownandflown.com/when-texting-teen-follow-four-rules

To Give Better Advice, Try Less Fixing and More Listening
https://www.npr.org/2020/02/24/808811358/how-to-give-advice-less-fixing-more-listening

What's Wrong With Giving Advice
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/turning-point/201503/whats-wrong-giving-advice

Learn about Motivational Interviewing Skills for Parents
https://learnaboutmilo.com/
https://www.naminh.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Motivational-Interviewing2021AnnualConference.pdf

Books by Dr. Ross Greene, a clinical psychologist who has worked with children and families for over 30 years
https://drrossgreene.com/books.htm

I AM NOT SICK I Don't Need Help! Written by Dr. Xavier Amador
https://leapinstitute.org/leap-books/

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