

Top 3 mistakes parents make when talking to middle school kids

To get the conversational ball rolling, avoid these common conversational pitfalls.

by: Valle Dwight | July 23, 2018



Talking to middle school kids can be a bit of an art. When you're ready to sit down and have a chat with your adolescent — whether it's to find out how his day went or to discuss more serious topics like homework, his behavior, or his friends — there is definitely a right way and a wrong way to do it. And if you happen to try the latter, you may well run smack-dab into a dead end.

“Talking to our children in a way that lets them express what is on their mind is extremely important,” explains Dr. Atilla Ceranoglu, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. “Talking to children from early on keeps both child and parent attuned to one another. It is solid preparation for the more stormy, tumultuous days of adolescence.”

An expert in parent-child communication, Ceranoglu offers tips on how to avoid the most common mistakes parents make when trying to get the conversational ball rolling.

Navigating minefields with your tween

Parent: “We need to talk.”

Child (*rolls eyes*): “Oh, brother.”

Parent: “Look, I’m just a little worried about some of those kids you’ve been hanging out with. I don’t think they’re good for you.”

Child: “What’s wrong with them? You’re always telling me to be open to people! You’re *such* a hypocrite! I can’t *believe* you!” (*Child stomps off and slams door.*)

Ceranoglu has a mentor (a pet lover, apparently) who describes child development with a nice analogy: Infants and toddlers are like puppies. You can cuddle them all you want, kiss them,

and hug them endlessly — they cannot get enough of you. But teenagers are like cats: They tend to avoid you most of the time, and once in a blue moon they will seek out your attention. The moment you try to touch them, however, they run away.

The top three mistakes parents make when talking to middle school kids

Trying to maintain and build a relationship with your middle schooler is crucial to surviving the oft-rocky teen years. And just as you know not to run headlong at a skittish cat, there are wrong ways to approach preteens and young teens.

1. Waiting for a crisis

When tensions are high, your child is not going to be in a position to open up to you. Engage early and often, before there is a problem. This way you will develop a rapport with your child that will be very important when an actual crisis arises. “Remember, it’s impossible to build a bridge in the middle of a quake, but a bridge built earlier may be flexible and sturdy enough to ward off a quake when it comes,” says Ceranoglu. “A relationship is just like that. Its foundation and flexible nature are important ingredients of happiness.”

2. Taking an approach that’s too direct

You’re probably not going to get a lot out of your child if you say, “Let’s sit down and talk.” Instead, do something together your child likes and let the conversation happen. Spending more time with him now will help build the bridges you’ll need later. “Your consistent presence in your child’s life will help your child feel comfortable with talking to you if something bothers him,” says Ceranoglu.

3. Letting the opportunity pass.

Your child may seem to be always pushing you away, but that doesn’t mean he really wants you to disappear! Be vigilant about observing his mood and approach him when you see a chance to talk or do something together.

What works when talking to middle school kids

Even if you manage to avoid these common conversational pitfalls, your child may still not be a little chatterbox, but that’s normal. All you can do is let him know that you are around and ready whenever he is, and be prepared to drop whatever you’re doing when your child wants to talk. Don’t worry, you won’t have to keep dropping things for the rest of your life, because once your child is convinced of your genuine interest, you will have built a relationship that encourages true communication.