

## How to Stay Connected With Your Kids

Your youngster has grown quiet and distant, and you're worried he or she might be stressed or unhappy. What do you do?

"Break the silence -- before there's a crisis," urges Elizabeth Berger, M.D., a child psychiatrist in Elkins Park, Pa., and author of "Raising Children With Character." "I don't believe it's ever normal for children to stop talking with their parents. You ought to be worried if the child isn't telling you what's going on -- the good things and the bad."

As they assert their growing independence, young people naturally want to act and make decisions on their own, but they still need and want to maintain a close relationship with the adults in their lives, Dr. Berger believes.

"Many parents inadvertently drive a wedge into the relationship by trying to micromanage a young person's behavior with too much control and discipline," says Dr. Berger. This undermines the child's confidence and often results in anger and rebellion.

As a result, "children today often feel lonely and isolated with their stress," says Dr. Berger. "Sadly, when parents notice this, it may not cross their minds to say, 'We've lost touch. Let's talk.' This can be the source of a lot of grief."

Even if you haven't talked in a while, "it's never too late for a parent to approach a child or teenager and try to open the door to an honest exchange."

If you've made sincere efforts to reach out and still can't start the conversation, call on a professional -- for example, a psychiatrist or psychologist, school counselor or member of the clergy. "Make the appointment and tell your child he or she needs to be available," advises Dr. Berger. "It would be very unusual for a child to ignore that."

### Watch for signs

Your child's behavior can also give you helpful insights into things going on in your child's life, "especially if the child is unable or unwilling to talk about problems," says Dr. Berger.

These are nonverbal clues your child could be asking for help:

- Poor grades. "Most youngsters of average intelligence should get excellent grades -- As and Bs -- if they're thriving," says Dr. Berger. "If they're struggling in school, they're probably not getting something they need in other areas of their lives." Parents and teachers are more likely to notice declines in performance, but a long history of Cs and Ds also should be a warning. A sudden change in grades -- from A's and B's to C's and Ds can be a warning sign too.
- Out-of-control actions. Most parents look for signs of alcohol and drug use as familiar warning signs because of their obvious detrimental health effects -- but it's also a cause for concern in

the general sense because they reflects that a child is giving up ownership and responsibility for his/her life.

- Truancy, bullying and legal problems also may be signs things are out of control.
- Expressions of hopelessness. All young people have periods of unhappiness or stress. If your child appears especially quiet or sad, though, or if this lasts for more than a few days, it's cause for concern. Be aware of comments such as, "What's the use"; strong emotions, such as excess guilt; or unusual actions, such as giving away possessions.
- Risky behavior. Children who push their luck in the face of deadly consequences are telling you they don't see much of a future.
- Chronic anger. Anger is a normal human emotion, even between a loving parent and child. But most fights get resolved quickly and life goes on. "Defiance, anger and excess moodiness aren't part of normal development," says Dr. Berger. These ongoing negative emotions can mean the child is locked in an ongoing power struggle with a parent, which saps a child's energy and interferes with normal development.

On the other hand, you probably don't need to be alarmed if your child "wears trendy clothing and multiple earrings or listens to heavy metal or rap music," says Dr. Berger. "Every generation has fashions their parents think are awful, and most kids who look bizarre today are public-spirited youngsters who will grow up to be sterling adults."

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