

# what's up?

## What's it all about?

Communication is the cornerstone of our relationships with teens—be they our children, students, neighbors, clients or patients. Creating safe, open and honest channels of communication help us share information and hear what a teen thinks, needs or is doing.

Because adolescence is a time of developing personal identity, testing of boundaries and increasing independence from family, communication can be contentious, argumentative and unsatisfying.

Time is another factor—teens and adults are spending more time working, watching TV or using the computer, reducing the opportunity for conversations. Meal times are still one of the main opportunities for parents to talk and listen to their teens.

## What are the details?

- 65% of Washington teens report that their parents often talk to them about what they are doing in school.
- 81% say their parents ask them where they will be going and with whom.
- 88% of teens agree that their parents encourage them to be the best they can be.
- A national YMCA study found that teens and their parents are talking and spending time together—an average of 80 minutes per day talking and eating together.
- 1 in 4 parents in the survey reported eating no more than 4 meals a week together as a family.
- Not having enough time together with their parents is a top concern among teens. Parents are more concerned about outside threats (such as drugs).

## talking with & listening to teens

### INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

#### Why does it matter?

Communication helps teens:

- Feel cared for and loved
- Believe they matter and are important to you
- Feel safe and not alone with their worries
- Learn how to tell what they feel and need
- Learn how to talk openly

#### Keep talking!

Start talking and keep talking! Begin with easier topics like sports, the media (music, videos, games, the Internet), school, friends, sports, the weather . . . then you can move on to sex, drugs and rock and roll.

There are some good reasons to keep talking. For example, studies indicate that clear, strong messages from parents to teens about sex are critical, yet parents report it is one of the most difficult things for them to do. So practice with easier subjects.

Before you tackle tough subjects, do your research. The Washington State Department of Health “What's Up?” series can be a start!

## TALKING WITH AND LISTENING TO TEENS INFORMATION FOR ADULTS WHO CARE ABOUT TEENS

### What can I do?

- Start early—talk to children through their entire lives.
- Be available—set aside enough time to deal with the subject at hand.
- Don't let the TV, telephone or other things distract or interrupt.
- For families, eat dinner together as often as possible.
- If you want to start a discussion, ask your teen's permission first.
- Be a good listener first.
- Show empathy, relax and be a good "sender" (tone, word choice).
- If a teen comes to you, recognize and thank him or her for trusting you to listen.
- Listen for tone as well as words. Watch body language.
- Encourage teens to express their feelings.
- Be ready to hear opinions you may not agree with.
- Resist the urge to lecture or nag.
- As you listen, validate what you can. There will be opportunities for dissent later.
- Ask questions about their ideas for solutions—don't always give answers.
- If asked a question, answer it. Don't evade.
- Don't pretend you know all the answers.
- If you are wrong, admit it.
- If you have to go to other sources for information, let teens know and then follow up.
- Be a good role model in your communications with others.
- Lastly, offer your opinion.

### Is it verbal abuse?

Negative communications can be verbal abuse when you resort to:

- Name calling
- Frequent criticism
- Blaming
- Violating teens' boundaries
- Yelling
- Threatening to hurt a teen
- Long silence (hours or days)

Sometimes adults are silent because they don't know what to say, they are afraid they will say something that makes matters worse, or they are unable to communicate due to their own issues and problems.

Some adults never learned how to be healthy communicators. Some techniques can help:

- Take a few deep breaths.
- Wait 5 minutes before talking to a teen if you are angry or in the wrong frame of mind.
- Try to find words to label your feelings.
- Say it to yourself or write it down (practice).
- Share your feelings with another adult.
- Focus on the present—don't add up the past or the future.

**hot  
links!**

Washington State Department of Health  
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For persons with disabilities, this document  
is available on request in other formats.  
Please call 1-800-525-0127.

#### American Academy of Pediatrics

"Healthy Communications with Your Child" Fact Sheet—[www.aap.org/family/healcomm.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/healcomm.htm)

#### YMCA

Parent & Teen Survey—[www.ymca.net/presrm/research/teensurvey.htm](http://www.ymca.net/presrm/research/teensurvey.htm)

#### Washington State PTA

"Every Teen Counts" Fact Sheet—1-800-562-3804 or [www.wastatepta.org](http://www.wastatepta.org)

#### Washington State Department of Health

"Talking with Teens about Sex" Public Health Fact Sheet—[www.doh.wa.gov/topics/teen\\_sex.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/topics/teen_sex.htm)

Washington State Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1999—[www.doh.wa.gov/publicat/publications.htm](http://www.doh.wa.gov/publicat/publications.htm)

#### American Social Health Association

Becoming an Askable Parent

1-800-783-9877 or <http://sunsite.unc.edu/ASHA>

