

## Staying in the Conversation

One of the questions often asked by parents is: “How can I stay connected to my child as s/he goes through the teen years? Being able to keep conversations going is an important way to stay connected. The Assets survey data reveals that only 27% of Arlington young people report having positive family communication. We all want to be understood and understand others – that’s at the heart of good family communication. What can parents do to foster more meaningful conversations between parents and teens?

### A Few Basic Principles

- Teens are in the process of “becoming”. Their job is to figure out who they are as individuals separate from their parents. Expect and encourage them to question and challenge as they try to develop their own values and attitudes
- Parents need to stay involved in their teens’ lives so they have something to separate from. *Don’t separate from your teen – they’ll do the separating!*
- If parents and other adults are not “there” for teens, their peers will be their *only* source of information and validation.
- No matter what, the consistent message parents want to communicate to their teens is:
  - *I love you, I care about you and I believe in you, and I’m always there for you.*
- And because they may not be too sure themselves, parents also want their teens to know:
  - *You, my son or daughter, are loveable, you are normal and you are competent.*
- Mutual respect is the foundation of good communication.

### Get Clear About Your Own Thoughts and Values

- Take some time to reflect on what you think about alcohol use, drugs and sexuality, about honesty, caring and responsibility, so you can send a clear message.
- Take the time to try to ensure that you as parents are sending the same clear messages – even if you are separated or divorced.
- Use other parents, friends and family members as support. This isn’t easy!

### Setting Up the Environment

Before the conversation even happens, there are things we can do to make sure we are sending a clear message that we want to work at having good communication with our teens. There are ways to build opportunities to communicate into your every-day family life. You can:

- Remember that it’s hard for teens (who are trying to become their own separate adults) to admit they still need to talk to their parents. It’s apt to make them feel childish.
- Be available and take every opportunity to talk with your teen, even when it’s inconvenient.
- Make sure you eat together at least a couple of times a week. Turn off the TV, radio etc. while you’re eating.
- Use the time you spend in the car picking up or dropping off your teen. Often the fact that you can *not* make eye contact feels more comfortable to teens.
- Watch TV shows and listen to the music your teen enjoys. Use the stories and lyrics to start conversations.
- Get to know your teen’s friends and talk with them. They’ll be thrilled to have another positive adult in their lives!
- Instead of sending your teen to do chores, do them with her and use that time to talk, or find a project to do together.

### During the Conversation

- LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN! All of us need to practice listening in ways that help us better understand what our young people are saying. Keep in mind - not all communication is verbal! Try to be aware of body language – your own and your teens too. Standing with your arms crossed sends a clear non-verbal message that you’re not ready to listen with an open mind.

- If your teenager seems to be hanging around, she/he might have something to talk about. Ask him!
- If he doesn't respond, follow-up in a few days.
- Follow-up with conversations by asking:
  - "Remember when you told me about \_\_\_\_? How's that going now?"
  - "I was wondering what you did about\_\_\_\_?"
- Be aware of *how* you are listening. Are you really trying to understand what your teen is saying or are you thinking about what you are going to say next? Listen to understand, not to advocate *your* position.
- Try to repeat back to your teen what you hear him/her saying and check to make sure that what you are hearing what they're saying are the same.
- Name your own feelings and help your teen get beyond "mad, sad and happy."

*The Assets Approach is a researched-based plan that is guiding our whole community in making sure **ALL** our children have what they need to become healthy, caring, responsible adults. After decades of research, the Search Institute ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)) has named 40 positive experiences, opportunities, relationship, attitudes, skills and values that have a powerful, positive impact on young people. Research shows that these 40 "assets" help children and teens make smart choices and grow-up with the skills they need to be strong, caring resilient adults. Together, the 40 assets provide a strong foundation on which children can build their lives.*

For more information about the practical "real-life" application of the Assets Framework, please contact Mary Ann Moran, Assets Liaison at [mmoran@co.arlington.va.us](mailto:mmoran@co.arlington.va.us) or (703) 228-1671.