

Positive Family Communication – It’s not easy!

Our assets survey tells us that nearly 2/3 of our young people experience family support, but only 27% of Arlington teens experience positive family communication and when you break that down by grade level, it’s even more interesting. In 6th grade, 47% of young people say they have positive family communication, but by 8th grade, it’s down to 25%.

As one Swanson parent said at the January Family Network meeting, “It’s hard to be supportive and have positive communication when they (the kids) are constantly in your face!” And young people say that although parents may be trying to be supportive and caring, but they’re really just “always in your business!”

So what’s going on here? How come this is so hard????

A great deal of what’s going on here is normal adolescent development and the more parents know about this development, the better things can be. Remember when your middle school son or daughter was only two years old? At about two, children begin their long journey toward becoming separate people and one of their favorite ways to express that new found separateness is to say “NO” to anything and everything! And when their “NO” was not acknowledged, things could deteriorate rapidly. Remember those days? Looking back now, you can probably see that your two year olds behavior wasn’t about you and how much they loved you or needed you. Your little one still loved you and needed you more then anything, but she also very much needed to become a separate person. Well it’s happening again! Your 6th, 7th or 8th grader still loves you and needs you more than anything, but he also needs to continue the work of becoming his own person.

Adolescence is all about “becoming” your own person and this is something to celebrate! All of us want our middle schoolers to become independent, have their own values, be life long learners and good friends. But “becoming” this independent person inevitably means separating from those closest to you and questioning everything that parents hold dear. This can be painful and scary for you *and* your child. And let’s face it – it isn’t easy to be caring and supportive when you are met with constant criticism and argument. But, just like when your child was two, it really does help to understand what’s going on and why your child is behaving this way. Understanding what’s going on is never an excuse to condone rude or hurtful behavior, but it can help parents not to take this behavior quite so personally. Here are a few thoughts to ponder.

- Development rarely follows a straight, direct path. Adolescent and all child development is more like a meandering country road than a super highway. Eventually you get there, but there are lots of twists and turns and even some back- tracking a long the way. So, if it seems like you’ve already dealt with a particular issue, you probably have. You just have to do it again!
- Generally young teens cycle from being off- kilter and inward focused to more balanced and outward focused as they move from year to year, with the odd years being the off-kilter years. Especially during those off kilter years, remember to *really look* for the qualities you admire in your son or daughter. (A great source of information is Your Ten-to Fourteen Year Old by Louise Bates Ames)
- Obviously, your child is changing physically and most of us can still remember how challenging those changes can be. It’s hard to maintain your equilibrium when you don’t even recognize your own body!
- But the most dramatic and far-reaching change in adolescence is something you can’t see at all; that is their emerging ability to think on a whole new level known as formal operations. As children reach their teen years they begin to develop the ability to think abstractly and in a more complex manner. This can certainly help with their higher math skills and other school work, but it also helps explain some other early teen behavior. Being able to think in this new way empowers young people to:
 - Argue! And as with any new skill, they want to practice a lot! And you certainly can help by engaging in interesting discussions about a variety of issues that come up. – current events, music, TV shows. But you don’t have to argue about chores, homework, or your family rules or other non-negotiable issues. Barbara Coloroso in her book, Kids are Worth It, has a wonderful piece of advice regarding those situations. She suggests

that the next time you start to argue with your twelve year old, you keep in mind that they have more energy, will outlast you and you'll lose!

- Idealize! Now, young people are not just aware of the here and now, but are able to think about possibilities. Now, they can envision the perfect world, the perfect school and the perfect parents. Guess what? None of us are going to measure up and that's where a lot of this criticism comes from. Be clear that it's not OK to speak to anyone in a rude or demeaning way, but then try and remember what's driving the behavior and not take the criticism too much to heart.
- Be self-conscious! Now, young people can think about what goes on in their minds and what goes on in other people's minds too. And because they are going through so many changes, they are also very much focused on themselves. So, if your teen seems self-centered, she is! But this is not because she is mean and selfish and you have failed miserably as a parent. It's developmental! And this self-centeredness only adds to their self-consciousness in that they imagine that everyone else is as concerned about their behavior and appearance as they are. So every little mistake or any tiny perceived flaw in appearance becomes a huge issue. This too will pass!

It's not easy becoming who you are and teenagers really, really need their parents to be there to support and guide them as they grow to adulthood. It's also not easy being a parent, but parents can be support for each other. So hang in there - You'll be glad you did!

What do you think about assets and families? I'd really appreciate your feedback. Thanks!
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