

It is 7 pm. Supper is on the table. Tina and Vikhram are waiting for their son, Sheldon, who finished extra-murals at 3:30 but has not got home yet. Suddenly they hear the back door open and close, and then the door of their son's room slams. Loud music starts to play. Vikhram goes to Sheldon's closed door and calls.

Vikhram: Sheldon? Are you in there, son? Supper's on the table and we'd like to start.

Sheldon: I'll eat later.

Vikhram: The food's hot now, and we've been waiting for you. Your mother and I would like you to eat with us.

Sheldon: I said I'll eat later.

Vikhram knocks and opens the door. The room is a mess of clothes, books and dirty coffee mugs. Vikhram opens his mouth to comment on the mess, shrugs his shoulders and starts again.

Vikhram: We'll eat now, as a family. It's important to your mother.

Sheldon throws down his jersey and pushes past Vikhram to the dining room table.

Tina: How was your day?

Sheldon: Fine.

Tina: You had the careers talk today, didn't you? Was it interesting?

Sheldon rolls his eyes.

Vikhram: Answer your mother, Sheldon.

Sheldon: It was fine, OK!



1. How can we improve communication with our children?
2. Do I need to know where my child is all the time?
3. Why does he close himself in his room?
4. Why does he like this music? Does it have a bad influence on him?
5. Why isn't he eating properly?
6. Should we insist on basic manners?
7. Why is he angry? How do I deal with his anger?
8. Why doesn't he like us - what have we done wrong?
9. Should parents present a united front, or is that like 'ganging up' on him?

Discussion

1. Many teenagers become horribly uncommunicative in adolescence. This is tied to mood swings caused by hormonal changes in their bodies. They have little control over these, and are often as alarmed by them as we are. It is also tied to a growing independence. Your child might resent being told what to do. Allow him to air his views. Respect his opinions and allow freedom where it is possible. There is a generation gap – try to be patient. Engage with his point of view. When your child points out shortcomings, say, 'Maybe you have a point,' or 'Do I really sound like that?' Don't be on the defensive. If you are irritated, stressed or not in the right frame of mind, say so and come back to the issue later.
A face-to-face formal talk is often threatening for him. Engage in some hobby, craft or sport, or go for a drive, or share a chore and use the time for a more spontaneous chat. Tone of voice is important: not preachy, but not falsely light!
Meal times are invaluable times for communication. They also provide opportunities for picking up social etiquette, for family time and routine. But make it positive: find out about good things that happened; tell your own positive stories; ask about hobbies; show your appreciation and how you value his contributions to the family. Implement other communication skills: make eye contact, put aside other jobs, be available, and listen actively by rephrasing, answering, questioning.
Don't be surprised or dismayed if the peer group is more attractive than the family at this stage of the teenager's life, and he doesn't want to spend as much time with you anymore. However, discuss the obligations he has to other members of the family and extended family. Negotiate what family time is essential (meal times, a few words with siblings, going to grandparents' golden wedding anniversary) and what can be sacrificed (cousin's third birthday party, scrabble on a Saturday afternoon.) Family values are still important, and teenagers need to belong to a family all of their own, as much as they need to belong to their peer group.
2. High school children crave some level of independence, but you need to know where he is. A calendar on the fridge door is a good start, with a short confirmation of movements every morning or the evening before. However, you might feel this is a

- waste of precious communication time, and the child might resent what he perceives as constant control. Go for 'dialogue' rather than 'lecture'. Explain your fears and let your child suggest workable solutions: 'Can I spend Thursday afternoon at Ben's – I'll phone from his house when I get there?' Encourage the child to start an internal dialogue: 'Where am I? Where should I be? What am I doing? What should I be doing?' Stick to limits once they are set. Believe in yourself as a parent. First prize is if he wants to bring his friends home, so encourage that by making your house as appealing as possible. Buy a basketball hoop or table-tennis table, stock hot-dogs or pre-roasted chickens as snacks, etc.
3. He might increasingly need the privacy of his room, but it should be agreed that if you knock he should let you in, either immediately or within a few minutes once he has collected himself. (Yes, he might also hide the cigarettes, but surprise raids are not the answer to that question, and the benefits of respecting his privacy are worth the risk.)
Many parents advise that the mess in a teenager's room is not worth a battle. Let him control the level of mess – but don't allow it to spill over into other rooms. He must also respect the laundry and dishwashing systems that operate in your household. He must remain responsible. If he loses or breaks items, he must replace them, or work towards replacing them.
 4. Teenagers enjoy music, and you have to accept that your tastes might differ. Allow him to play his music, and take some time to listen to it yourself. Try to make it a point of conversation, not just criticism. However, if you pick up that the words or culture of the music he listens to are having a negative effect on his behaviour, that needs to be addressed. But don't be too quick to assume that bad behaviour stems from his music. Unpack the issue before you leap in to criticise – it will just place him on the defensive.
 5. All our children, especially girls, should be encouraged to feel that weight is not an issue from an aesthetic point of view, but we need to keep an eye on overweight or under-weight as health concerns. Also, too much sugar or junk food or MSG in taste-enhanced food can affect mood, concentration and control. From pre-primary school to high school, children need to be fed

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nutritiously. On the other hand, the body seems remarkably efficient at getting what it needs, and if the child is not over- or under-weight, is not losing concentration or becoming moody or developing acne or anaemia, etc, a spate of junk food might be a battle you choose not to fight.

6. Decide what constitutes 'basic manners' and insist on it: e.g. greeting, no swearing. Perhaps ignore other minor problems. (Talking with the mouth full? Grunting out a one-word response?). We need to make sure that we are not continually criticising. Praise his good behaviour wherever you can.
7. Anger is often a result of teenage hormones in flux, or of sadness or confusion. Teenagers, especially boys, are not always able to articulate their feelings. Encourage him to work out why he is angry. He might be disappointed with his performance at sport or school-work, hurt by a friend's behaviour, angry at your tendency to control his life, or he might be sleep-deprived. Try to find a solution to address the source of the anger. We should

allow the anger, but not rudeness or dangerous behaviour. Explain the distinction to your child. Instead of punishing him when he behaves badly, try to create opportunities for restitution, e.g. 'Your brother gets upset when you swear at him: can you do something to make it up to him?' or 'OK, we'll talk later.' (And then ask him to give you a hand with the braai the next evening, and talk then.)

8. Don't panic – he will emerge from adolescence! Your work is mainly done by now. Keep loving him and modelling desirable behaviour. Avoid developing tunnel vision where everything seems bleak and every incident is a fight. Work on having good times together; watch TV programmes that make you all laugh; do something that he wants to do. Give him reason to like you!
9. Children quickly exploit any dissention between parents, so beware. It is not helpful to give conflicting advice, but neither is it pleasant for the child to be reprimanded by both parents for the same misdemeanour. Support for your spouse is important, but any perception of 'ganging up' will be counter-productive.

Our presence is a way of being attentive and welcoming, of listening and engaging with them – from Presence by Marcellin Champagnat, founder of Marist schools

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Useful contact information

Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre	011 484 1734
Childline	08 000 55555
Famsa: Parktown	011 788 4784
Soweto	011 933 1301
Teddy Bear Clinic	011 484 4554
Lifeline	011 728 1347
DARE (formerly Drugwise)	011 788 0717

Further reading

<http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/involvement.aspx>
Parenting with Panache by Dereck Jackson, Wordsmiths, Johannesburg: 2001
Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, Ballantine Books, New York: 1999

Other titles

in this series include:

Peer pressure
 Drugs
 Fear
 Pressure and suicide
 Materialism
 Balancing one's time
 Bullying
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 Sleepovers
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