

Using Movies to Talk to Teens

How to Have Great Conversations (of all types) With Your Teen...

Although many teens are notoriously resistant to conversations with their parents, with a strategic approach and a lot of patience, it is possible to discuss many important issues with your teenage children. This e-course will suggest movies to watch with teens and give you questions to turn those movies into meaningful conversations. But before you begin, let's discuss great ways to have conversations of all types with your teenager.

The Approach

While I believe many teens DO like to talk, a direct approach may not be the best way to start. When a parent starts off with "I want to talk," a teen may feel put on the spot, defensive, suspicious, or even feel like they are a project on their parent's to-do list. Instead, allowing conversations to develop naturally out of observations of the surrounding news or culture puts teens more at ease and usually feels more natural to everyone involved. If you think about it, a parent-child relationship is inherently imbalanced - very much the way a supervisor/subordinate relationship is imbalanced. If your boss calls you into her office to talk, it doesn't matter if all she asks is what you thought of that weekend's *Modern Family* episode - your conversation won't feel natural. Most likely, you'll be looking for an ulterior motive or wondering if you are giving the "right" answer. In contrast, if you bump into your boss in the break room while he is getting coffee, and your boss says, "Wow, did you watch the *Breaking Bad* finale? What'd you think?" - you'll feel much less on edge and you'll be much more likely to give a real answer.

On those occasions when you do need to be more direct (because there just isn't a way to ease into the conversation organically without it sounding forced), try to frame the conversation so that your child is helping you. Doing so allows your teen to feel more like an equal and counterbalances the defensiveness or suspicions that can come from starting a conversation directly. Here are some examples:

- "I've been wondering about the articles I see in the news about sexting. Can you help me understand why teens might send those pictures to each other?"
- "I need to talk to you about a situation I've been hearing about. Teen pregnancy keeps coming up in conversations, and I've never gotten your perspective. Do you think teen pregnancy is an issue at your school? What do you think are the reasons why teens get pregnant?"
- "I need to give a friend some advice on talking to her kids about abusive relationships. Do you have any ideas on what she could say? Here are the warning signs that are concerning her..."

In each of these conversation starters, a parent is seeking to discuss a tough issue with a teen, but not in a way that "corners" the teen. In the first scenario, the teen is given credit for being the "expert" on teens, and when a supervisor or superior asks for our opinion because they see us as the expert, we feel good and are more likely to share honestly. In the second, a parent wants to honestly hear their child's opinion about a topic, before discussing the topic directly. The parent is recognizing a hole in their knowledge: their child's thoughts. Doing so demonstrates humility of perspective and respect for the teen - which goes a long way in having a productive conversation. The last scenario may seem a little sly, but my guess is you can think of some other parent who needs advice about an issue related to teens. Use that to your advantage and ask for your teen's advice on what to tell other teens as often as possible. Like the other scenarios, this one demonstrates respect and makes a teen feel good about himself and his ideas - plus, you may get some really good advice!

The next email will be the first to discuss a specific movie. We'll start with a film almost everyone has heard of. Preview it before watching it with your teen, but don't be afraid to use the content to your advantage. There are a lot of great questions to come out of the movie. Then next week, we'll talk about the Dos and Don'ts of difficult conversations