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Connecting With Your Preteen

Staying connected as kids approach the teen years and become more independent may become a challenge for parents, but it's as important as ever — if not more so now.

While activities at school, new interests, and a growing social life become more important to growing kids, parents are still the anchors, providing love, guidance, and support.

And that connection provides a sense of security and helps build the resilience kids need to roll with life's ups and downs.

What to Expect

Your preteen may act as if your guidance isn't welcome or needed, and even seem embarrassed by you at times. This is when kids start to confide more in peers and request their space and privacy — expect the bedroom door to be shut more often.

As difficult as it may be to swallow these changes, try not to take them personally. They're all signs of growing independence. You're going to have to loosen the ties and allow some growing room.

But you don't have to let go entirely. You're still a powerful influence — it's just that your preteen might be more responsive to the example you set rather than the instructions you give. So practice what you'd like to preach; just preach it a little less for now.

Modeling the qualities that you want your preteen to learn and practice — respectful communication, kindness, healthy eating, and fulfilling everyday responsibilities without complaining — makes it more likely that your son or daughter will comply.

What You Can Do

Small, simple things can reinforce connection. Make room in your schedule for special times, take advantage of the routines you already share, and show that you care.

Here are some tips:

- **Family meals:** It may seem like a chore to prepare a meal, particularly after a long day. But a shared family meal provides valuable together time. So schedule it and organize it just as you would any other activity. Even if you have to pick up something pre-made, sit down together to eat it. Turn off the TV and try to tune out the ringing phone. If it's impossible to do every night, schedule a regular weekly family dinner night that accommodates kids' schedules. Make it something fun, and get everyone involved in the preparation and the cleanup. Sharing an activity helps build closeness and connection, and everyone pitching in reinforces a sense of responsibility and teamwork.
- **Bedtime and goodnight:** Your child may not need to be tucked in anymore, but maintaining a consistent bedtime routine helps preteens get the sleep needed to grow healthy and strong. So work in some winding-down time together before the lights go out. Read together. Go over the highlights of the day and talk about tomorrow. And even if your preteen has outgrown the tuck-in routine, there's still a place for a goodnight kiss or hug. If it's shrugged off, try a gentle hand on the shoulder or back as you wish your child a good night's sleep.

- **Share ordinary time:** Find little things that let you just hang out together. Invite your preteen to come with you to walk the dog. Invite yourself along on his or her run. Washing the car, baking cookies, renting movies, watching a favorite TV show — all are opportunities to enjoy each other's company. And they're chances for kids to talk about what's on their mind. Even riding in the car is an opportunity to connect. When you're driving, your preteen may be more inclined to mention a troubling issue. Since you're focused on the road, he or she doesn't have to make eye contact, which can ease any discomfort about opening up.
- **Create special time:** Make a tradition out of celebrating family milestones beyond birthdays and holidays. Marking smaller occasions like a good report card or a winning soccer game helps reinforce family bonds.
- **Show affection:** Don't underestimate the value of saying and showing how much you love your preteen. Doing so ensures that kids feel secure and loved. And you're demonstrating healthy ways to show affection. Still, preteens may start to feel self-conscious about big displays of affection from parents, especially in public. They may pull away from your hug and kiss, but it's not about you. Just reserve this type of affection for times when friends aren't around. And in public, find other ways to show that you care. A smile or a wave can convey a warm send-off while respecting boundaries. Recognize out loud your child's wonderful qualities and developing skills when you see them. You might say, "That's a beautiful drawing — you're really very artistic" or "You were great at baseball practice today — I loved watching you out there."
- **Stay involved:** Stay involved in your preteen's expanding pursuits. Getting involved gives you more time together and shared experiences. You don't have to be the Scout leader, homeroom mom, or soccer coach to be involved. And your child may want to do more activities where you're not in charge. That's OK. Go to games and practices when you can; when you can't, ask how things went and listen attentively. Help kids talk through the disappointments, and be sympathetic about the missed fly ball that won the game for the other team. Your attitude about setbacks will teach your preteen to accept and feel OK about them, and to summon the courage to try again.
- **Stay interested:** Stay interested and curious about your preteen's ideas, feelings, and experiences. If you listen to what he or she is saying, you'll get a better sense of the guidance, perspective, and support needed. And responding in a nonjudgmental way means your child will be more likely to come to you anytime tough issues arise.

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