

Chapter 7

*H*ow to Establish Good
Communication
with Your Child



We must be the change we wish to see in the world.

-Mahatma Gandhi

Good communication with your child is another way to influence whether or not your child will consume alcohol and other drugs. Research tells us that kids who have good communication with their parents have a better chance of avoiding substance abuse. Families with good communication talk honestly and openly about their feelings and about such problems as peer pressure, teen pregnancy, and alcohol and other drugs. Teens who do not consume alcohol and other drugs usually feel that their parents love them and trust them. They have had a say in family rules and have been allowed to make choices appropriate to their ages and abilities.

At the core of good communication is your willingness and ability to listen to your child. Student surveys reveal that when parents listen to their child's concerns and feelings, they feel more comfortable and are more likely to not consume alcohol and other drugs. Children who receive lots of love and attention from parents feel more secure and have a higher sense of self-esteem. When they confront new or stressful situations, they're less likely to turn to alcohol and other drugs and more likely to discuss the situation with their parents.

Bridge Builder's Checklist

Tips for how to listen effectively.

- 1) **Create a climate in which your child feels comfortable.** Your non-verbal cues will send messages to your child, so consider the position of your

chair, the tone of your voice, eye contact, and facial expressions.

- 2) **Give your child an opportunity to talk.** Stop talking and give your child sufficient time to complete his or her thoughts and process what has been said.
- 3) **Demonstrate interest by asking appropriate questions.** Questions can help you clarify your child's thoughts and suggestions. Be sure that you're interpreting what has been said correctly.
- 4) **Listen to the complete message.** Listen to the total message before forming a response.
- 5) **Encourage your child to talk.** Use door-opening statements ("You seem distracted today . . ." or "Tell me what is going on . . .") that invite a response.
- 6) **Focus on content, not delivery.** Avoid being distracted by your child's poor grammar, tone, or manners. It is what is being said that is important.
- 7) **Listen for main ideas.** Try to pick out the conversation's central theme.
- 8) **Deal effectively with emotionally-charged language.** Be aware of words or phrases that produce anxiety and trigger emotions.
- 9) **Identify areas of common experience and agreement.** Note similar experiences of your own or offer a shared point of view to communicate acceptance and understanding.
- 10) **Deal effectively with whatever blocks you from listening.** Be aware of personal blocks that may prevent you from hearing what your child is saying.

Get into the habit of talking with your child every day to *establish and maintain good communication with your child*. Building a close relationship with her when she's young will make it easier for her to come to you when she has a problem. With a closer relationship to you, she'll be less likely to develop mental health problems and to experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Here are some more tips for how to establish good communication with your child.

Bridge Builder's Checklist

Ways to establish and maintain good communication with your child.

- 1) **Be willing to listen more and lecture less.** Your child needs to believe that you're a safe person to talk to. To enable your child to feel safe coming to you with their questions and concerns:
 - a) Listen closely to what your child says.
 - b) Don't dump anger or disappointment on your child about what you may be hearing.
 - c) If it will help diffuse the feelings being provoked by the discussion, take a short break until you and/or your child can settle down.
 - d) Be attuned not only to what your child is saying but what your child is NOT saying.
 - e) Don't assume a hands-off approach by waiting for your child to always come to you. Check in with your child. See how they're doing. Ask if there are any problems that they're wrestling with that you may be able to help them with.
 - f) Be available when your child says he needs to talk to you. Don't brush him off. Don't ask him to wait until there's a better time for you. If your child wants to discuss something at a time

when you can't give it your full attention, explain why you can't talk, set a time to talk later, and then carry through on it!

- 2) **Be an encouraging parent.** Encourage your children when they need a little boost to get over the hump. Praise them for actions that are noteworthy. Don't focus exclusively on those things that you judge to be bad or wrong.
- 3) **Give unambiguous messages.** Don't equivocate. Don't hem and haw. Your child looks to you to provide leadership. Leadership is most effectively provided by clear messages that don't create confusion or double binds of "damned if you do, damned if you don't".
- 4) **Model appropriate behavior.** It is critical that you not only "talk the talk" but "walk the walk". Make sure that your own actions reflect the standards of behavior that you expect from your child.
- 5) **Respond rather than react to your child.** For example: "I am very concerned about..." or "I understand that it is sometimes difficult..." are better ways to respond to your child than beginning sentences with "You should," or "If I were you," or "When I was your age we didn't..." Speaking for oneself sounds thoughtful and is less likely to be considered a lecture or an automatic response.
- 6) **During the conversation, acknowledge what your child is saying.** Move your body forward if you're sitting, touch a shoulder if you're walking, or nod your head and make eye contact.