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What Girls Need to Know About Growing Up

Friend or Mother? Tips for Talking With Your Daughter

WebMD Feature
By Emily Soares
Reviewed By Brunilda Nazario, MD

Talking with your daughter about sensitive issues is something that many moms dread. But you don't need to have a formal sit-down. Having "the talk" about delicate subjects shouldn't happen in one fell swoop, anyway. Follow these steps to help your daughter talk often with you about the issues she's dealing with.

Start Talking to Your Daughter Early

Talking with your teenage daughter about important topics should start years before she reaches adolescence, says Atlanta pediatrician Deborah Pollack, MD. "The most important thing is for parents to have lots of small talks, not one big talk. Start early with age-appropriate discussions and advance as your child's maturity advances, especially between ages 11 and 14."

Be Open When You Talk With Your Daughter

Being open with your teenage daughter will help her talk to you, says Melanie Bliss, PhD, a clinical psychologist and part owner of THRIVE Center for Psychological Health in Decatur, Ga.

"If parents can be non-judgmental and open-minded, then kids will be more willing to approach them. When parents ask questions in an accusatory manner, the kids will put up walls. Open-ended questions like, 'how do you feel about your friends these days?' instead of 'what happened at that party last night?' allow more opportunity for discussion."

Sharing your own experiences can also help when talking to your daughter, says Nadine Kaslow, PhD, professor and vice chair, Emory Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences in Atlanta. Mothers can become a role model when they share just enough – but not too much – about their own teen years. "Share with them personal things, without telling them things that wouldn't be appropriate," she says."

Find the Balance Between Friend and Mother

For most moms, the line between friend and authority figure is a tightrope walk, especially during a girl's teen years.

Kay Entrekin, MD, an Atlanta obstetrician-gynecologist, is also the parent of two teenage daughters. She coaches parents and teens on how to communicate through a program titled "Puberty Rocks." Though the balance isn't easy to strike, she says a teenage girl needs guidance more than she needs another buddy.

"Professionally, I know that you must be parent first and friend second. In general, the more you listen and try to understand the underlying reason for your daughter's frustration or worries or other troubling emotions, the easier it is to get to a solution," she says. "Getting angry generally doesn't work well and neither does being a girlfriend at all times."

Bliss agrees that trying to be too much of a friend can backfire. "Sometimes parents try so hard to make themselves approachable that they insert themselves into the details of their kid's world. Most kids like to keep their worlds separate. They want to have a parent there for parental things, but they don't always want their parents involved in their personal world," she says.

Good parents can be their teen's occasional confidante, and yet still have appropriate authority and set healthy boundaries, says Kaslow. "I think first and foremost it is important for mothers and their daughters to have a loving and close relationship, so that the daughter feels safe, securely attached, valued, respected, and cared for," she says.

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