



PARENT GUIDE

Getting Teens Talking



It seems like yesterday that your teen was chatting away about everything and anything that crossed their mind—voluntarily.

Who said what at the lunch table. The latest achievement of their favorite athlete. Nerves about auditions, or tests, or tryouts. That new outfit or video game console or TikTok trend.

*Their embarrassments. Their hurts. Their longings.
Their questions about life, the future, faith, and God.*

You had a front row seat to it all. Until one day, you didn't.

Even the most innocent questions are now answered with a huff. And asking anything beyond “how are you?” might as well be a police interrogation.

You knew the teen years might not be easy. You remember your own teen years and how hard those were. Maybe you did everything “right” so their adolescence would be easier. But your front row seat turned into a nosebleed, anyway. **What gives?**

This quick guide will help you understand three things:

- Why your teen is shutting down around you
- When to worry—and when to let it go
- What you can do to get them talking again

Why is this happening?

You might have questions about whether your teen dislikes you, what went wrong between you, and if that one thing you said that one time ruined everything. Put those aside. It's okay to feel your feelings (more on that later)... but also, **this isn't about you at all.**

Your teens aren't *rejecting you*. **They're forming their identity apart from you.** It's developmentally appropriate, and it **won't last forever.** Their brains are beginning a crucial transformation. At the end of it, they will have established their inner adult life—something unique to them and totally hidden from you.

But this means they have big emotions, and they're more reluctant to share them. At times, they might not even have the tools yet to describe how they're feeling. They're also learning to withhold information, and they're developing discretion. Crucial skills for adulthood but excruciating for parents.

This change is caused by hormones and brain development, not by anything you did or failed to do. The good news is, you're not bigger than their biology. You didn't cause this. But the hard part? You can't stop it from happening.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

DEUTERONOMY 6:6-7

Timeline

Ages 9-11: Tweens will start to withdraw. **Spontaneous storytelling might fade**, and private habits—like keeping a journal or retreating often to their room—become more commonplace. Girls, especially, may still talk a lot, but suddenly pull back.

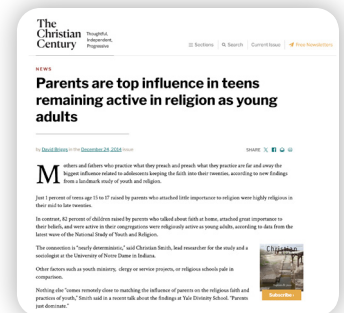
Ages 12-14: Young teenagers withdraw further, becoming short and abrupt in conversation. **This is**

the age of the one-word answer. Peers will often replace parents as their primary source of approval and trusted information.

Ages 15-18: Older teenagers will tentatively re-engage with parents, though their conversations will look different now. Sometimes they'll want to talk without stopping, and other times, it's a lost cause. **They may have hard questions** about faith, doubt, and their own future.

The truth is ... time is on your side.

Research from UC Berkley, Harvard, and **Notre Dame** has shown that parents are still the greatest influence on teenagers. Parents are also the strongest source of faith transmission in the world—teens whose parents have a durable, ongoing relationship with Jesus are incredibly likely to grow up to share their faith.



When should you worry?

Red flags at any age include:

- Sudden personality changes (An easygoing child who becomes guarded and fearful.)
- Total withdrawal and isolation. (A loss of connection with peers, not just parents.)
- Persistent anger and hostility. (A pattern of reacting quickly and emotionally to even small or nonexistent triggers.)

These are all indications that your teen could be struggling with something beyond developmental changes in their brain and body. You might need to enlist the help of a trusted spiritual leader or mental health professional to find out what's really going on.



Three T's to connect with any teen

- **Timing.** Parents often want to connect with their teens at the very moment they need space to process their emotions. But pelting them with questions right after school or a sports game can feel like an assault. Instead, choose your moment carefully. Talk when the stakes are low. A long car ride, a late-night snack, or an early morning walk are all options to try.
- **Tone.** Remember, you're not on a fact-finding mission. **Your goal is connection—and that starts with curiosity.** Anything you can find out about your teen's life is secondary to the conversation itself. Keep your tone sincere, nonthreatening, and as casual as possible. Try to talk side-by-side, instead of "sitting them down" and asking questions head-on. Bonus points if you can incorporate an activity, like cooking together, shooting hoops, walking the dog, or watching a movie you've both seen before.
- **Topic.** Teens tend to open up when you introduce a topic that they find genuinely interesting—even if you don't know much about it. **So be teachable.** Bringing up a favorite sports team, a big artist's new album, or even asking about a social media trend can be an opportunity to discuss something deeper or find out what's really on your teen's mind.

Nothing kills conversation like judgment. So practice your "not shocked" face. Seriously, look in the mirror and imagine you've heard something truly horrifying. Watch your face. Try it again, and this time, don't react. **If you can keep your cool even when your teen enters uncharted territory, you're much more likely to keep them talking.**

Tried-and-true conversation starters

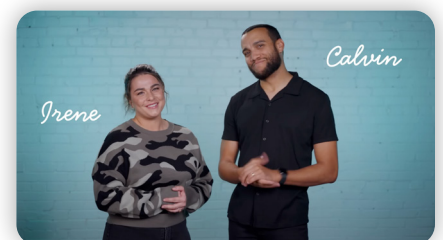
Every week, we offer parents conversation starters on the biggest entertainment, technology, and culture stories in our weekly newsletter, The Culture Translator. **We look for open-ended, curiosity-driven questions** to kick-start rich and interesting conversations. Here are some of our favorite evergreen conversation starters you can try with your teen!

- What do you think is the biggest difference between my generation and yours?
- Tell me about a conspiracy theory you think might be true.
- If you could be born in any place, in any decade, which time and place would you choose?
- Imagine you woke up tomorrow with \$500 million. What would you do differently? What would stay the same?
- If you could be an influencer with millions of followers, what would your platform be about?
- Imagine our family is a cartoon show. Who would be the main characters, and what would the plot of a typical episode be?
- What's something that you believe in strongly that we've never talked about?

Additional resources

When your teen withdraws, you might need reinforcements. We recommend seeking answers in the Bible, as well as a hefty dose of neuroscience, psychology, and prayer. Here are some of our favorite resources to understand what's going on inside your teen—and inside of you—during this time of life.

- Parents' Guide to Difficult Conversations (free, from Axis)
- The Male Brain and The Female Brain, by Louann Brizendine, MD
- The Soul of Shame, by Curt Thompson, MD
- **"This One Conversation Could Change How You Parent Forever,"** a video produced in partnership with our friends at the Fuller Youth Institute's TENx10 Foundation!



Your teen still needs you.

It's normal for your teen to have this shift... And it's normal for this shift to feel like rejection. Nothing will erase this ache, but time will ease it—and community can help you cope with it.

Find someone who isn't your teen who will talk about this with you. Connect with other parents who have teens and look to a few empty nesters for advice.

Understand your own story. Find a way to regulate feelings of shame and fear before they come up, instead of in your most painful moments. Reflect on your own teenage years as a start.

Pray often and show up calm. If your teen feels like they have to manage their emotions and yours, too, you've put them in an impossible situation.

Make space in your life to seek wisdom from God. There may be days when you need a script to get the words out. Here's a prayer we wrote to help.

A prayer for the weary parent

God, it's hurting me to try to connect with my child right now. I feel rejected, and it stings. But I know that the connection we had when they were little isn't lost forever. It's changing. But right now, I'm worried, and I'm scared.

Grant me the words to ask good questions that make my teen feel seen. Give me patience and empathy. Help me discern when to speak and when to listen. Help me to represent the gospel—offering safety, forgiveness, and truth. Please see me in my loneliness and offer me comfort and peace. In the name of Jesus, I pray for my family to reflect your love and glory—amen.

