

# Communicating with Adolescents

Just as light is transformed when it passes through a prism, so our children change as they go through adolescence. One of the characteristics of this change is the dynamics of how we communicate with children in this age group. The same children who, during their elementary school years, readily responded to and initiated conversations and interactions with adults, now display a whole new set of mannerisms and tendencies. They are entering a time in their lives when they are questioning, challenging, and separating; when they are less willing to admire or trust the adults in their lives.

Recognizing that, it is crucial that we find ways to stay in touch with these children during these transformational years, when they seem to invest a great deal of energy in resisting our attempts to communicate with them.

There are, however, those adults who, by either inclination or disposition, are willing, able, and inclined to connect, converse, and communicate naturally and comfortably with young adolescents. We recognize these people in our schools. They are the teachers that middle-grade students seek out in precious free moments during the school day, who always seem to have unscheduled groups of students in their rooms, and who are frequently approached by students who feel comfortable initiating interactions with them.

## The Unwritten Rules

What are the unwritten rules that some adults seem to understand about creating a climate and circumstances that cause adolescents to seek them out?

*Show interest in how an adolescent is doing as a student and, more importantly, as a person.* The curriculum alone does not form a bond that inspires, motivates, and connects us to students. They are more likely to communicate with adults whom they sense not only care about *what* they are learning but *who* they are becoming.

*Teach in ways that relate to what is going on in an adolescent's life.* We have all learned, in our formal educational training, the importance of curricular relevance. Teachers can connect with

kids by knowing how to present issues, examples, projects, and stories that help students understand the world as they are beginning to know it.

*Provide a personal environment that is accepting and a physical environment that is a sanctuary.* Adolescents need to feel safe, both physically and socially. Given the insecurities that characterize this age group, there is a tendency for them to overestimate how much they are being monitored, compared, and scrutinized. Consequently, they seek out places of sanctuary where they can find respite from the energy required to maintain the pretenses of adolescence. They are comforted by and benefit from adults who provide an environment where they can briefly drop their guard.

*Practice "unconditional listening."* The adults that students connect with are first and foremost unconditional listeners. They tend to possess a great deal of knowledge and awareness that young adolescents can benefit from hearing, but they are clearly strategic about when and how much advice they dispense. By being practiced listeners, they are helping the children frame and better understand their own questions and circumstances.

*Be friendly without trying to be their friend.* Adolescents are comforted by and benefit from knowing that there are adults who understand and tolerate the energy they invest in rebelling against many of the directions and lessons offered to them. They appreciate kindness and friendliness, and they are comforted and reassured by the presence of mature adults in their lives.

What adolescents need are adults who have the disposition, patience, and understanding not only to communicate with them, but to be a guiding and stabilizing presence in their lives as they pass through this turbulent developmental period. ■

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