



3 Steps to Connect With a Struggling Teen

**Helping parents and teachers
connect with youth
&
Model psychological flexibility
(on most days!)**



Knowing the best thing to do or say when a teenager is in a tough spot can be difficult. The impulse to fix their issues can be strong. Sometimes, we need to remind ourselves how much they have developed from the early years. We cannot be the adult fixers anymore.

Attempting to fix teenagers' problems often has the opposite effect. It can close down a connection. It can start disagreements. And you're more likely to end up in that same old stuck place, hearing them shout, "You just don't listen."



Imagine approaching challenging moments with a new strategy and actively cultivating emotional agility for you and your teen.

- You'll create a supportive environment where your teenager feels heard and validated.
- You'll be more aware of your own emotional triggers and less likely to make the problem personal.
- You'll ease their current stress and model an invaluable life skill —emotional flexibility.



The Essential First Step



1

MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE

- Pause and take a couple of breaths.
- Join your teen without an agenda, taking a moment to observe and sense their state of being.
- Be aware of their physical messages. What does their posture reveal? What is their tone telling you? Tune into their emotions—whether calm, anxious, or something else entirely.
- Be aware of their emotional tone. Mirror their feelings to understand them better; you might adopt a similar posture or imagine yourself experiencing life as it has been for them lately. You are trying to gain a stronger sense of what’s happening for them.
- When it seems right, offer an inviting question like, “What’s up?” This gesture of solidarity can open doors to deeper understanding.

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The Power Of Empathy



2

LISTEN WITH YOUR HEART, NOT JUST YOUR MIND

- Listen as they share what's happening for them.
- Listen with your ears:
 - don't interrupt,
 - don't problem solve,
 - don't judge it as unimportant – with your adult hat on it might seem unimportant to you but catastrophic to them,
 - don't make it about you – it's about them just for now
 - Nonverbal cues are as crucial as your silence; a nod or a gentle "I see" can convey volumes of support.
- Place yourself in their emotional space. For example, consider how you would feel if you were in the same situation, e.g., if you were left out, ignored, or confused.
- Voice one observation that names their emotions – “You seem sad. Is that right?”



The Unnumbered Step



WHEN TO PROBLEM SOLVE OR OFFER SOLUTIONS

This isn't step four because we wanted to encourage you to leave it out more often than bringing it in. Offering help is a delicate dance—it should come at their invitation.

- Inquire if they want your input or assistance: “Do you want me to help with this, or would you like my opinion?”
- If they say no, most of the time, try to accept it *. The path through adolescence is filled with challenges they must navigate. Learning to solve problems takes practice, which includes the possibility of failing and making mistakes. They can't learn this if you fix everything for them, but if you follow the above steps, you will be a source of strength they can always rely on.

*Note: Sometimes, a parent or teacher must decide to intervene, even if the young person doesn't want it. But these occasions are much less frequent than adults might assume. With background support from adults, teens can solve friendship problems, school challenges, and many daily life hassles.

