

How to establish trust and boundaries with a teenager

The transition from adolescence to independent adulthood is a journey of discovery with lots of risks and rewards attached. It can be hard for parents to stand back without the fear that the teenager might get into trouble or do something that puts them in danger.

1. Think before you act

If you're concerned about what your teenager is getting up to you might be thinking about searching their bedroom, but there are a few things to consider before you do.

Considerations before searching a teenager's bedroom

- Searching their bedroom without their consent will probably feel like a betrayal of trust and is likely to cause resentment. Let them know what it is you're concerned about and give them the chance to hand over anything that shouldn't be there before searching.
- They're more likely to agree to collaborate if they don't fear the consequences, so explain that the search will be a gateway to dialogue rather than punishment or recriminations.
- If they do hand something over, reinforce how positive a step this is.
- If you do decide to search their room, think beforehand about what you might find and what you're going to do about it. The more prepared you are the easier it will be to think and act rationally rather than being led by your emotions.

2. Avoid jumping to conclusions

Regardless of whether it's something they hand to you or that you find, try not to be judgemental or jump to conclusions about it. Make sure you know the full facts before you react.

Things to consider before reacting

- As parents we tend to think the worst, so it's better if the explanation comes from them rather than from your own imagination. Allow them to tell you about what you have found and why they have it before you go making accusations.
- Remember that adolescence is a time of experimentation and establishing an identity, which is likely to involve some questionable decision-making. Think back to your own adolescence and the mistakes you made before passing judgement.

3. Start a conversation

Offer them the space to have a discussion where you can be open and honest with each other.

Guidance for having a difficult conversation with a teenager

- It's important that you only talk to them about it when you're both calm and can reflect and discuss things openly rather than being driven by strong emotions.
- Start by telling them what you're concerned about and asking them to tell you what's going on.
- Sharing some of your own experiences and lessons learnt from your teenage years may help you to establish rapport and have a more honest and open dialogue.

4. Be aware of digital dangers

It may be that what their hiding is not physical but digital. The more you're able to have an honest and open dialogue the easier it will be to notice if something's wrong.

Tips for keeping young people safe online

- Teenagers need to become independent and learn about the world from their own experiences, but it's important to make them aware of the dangers of compromising their safety or reputation. Make sure they understand the potential dangers of sharing personal information or images of themselves online.
- Watch for the red flags that something might be wrong. They may have started to become more secretive about what they're up to or you may have noticed changes in their behaviour or language that suggest someone may be having a negative influence on them.
- It's important to respect their privacy and to have a relationship built on trust. This is made easier by being open and honest with each other from an early age as possible so as to avoid certain topics becoming taboo.
- Above all, trust your instincts. If something feels wrong, it probably is.

5. Reach out

Remember, whatever you're concerned about; there'll be support available.

Who to contact for information, advice and support

- As a first port of call, speak with your GP or contact your local community child and adolescent mental health team.
- If you're unsure as to whether you should be concerned about something or not, sense-check it with other parents, or, if you're really worried, check with the police.
- NHS advice for parents worried about a teenager. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/worried-about-your-teenager/>
- NHS advice for struggling to cope with a teenager's challenging behaviour. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/cope-with-your-teenager/>