



# 6 Steps to Strengthening Your Parent/Caregiver-Teen Relationship

## A Guide for Parents & Caregivers

February 2024

Teens who are close with their parents and caregivers are more likely to avoid risky behaviors like smoking, alcohol use and early sexual activity, and they tend to be more self-reliant, stay engaged at school, and respect their parents'/caregivers' guidance.<sup>1-5</sup> When they have a strong bond with their parents and caregivers, teens are also more likely to stop and think about how they expect them to behave. Although it may not always be obvious, teens really do value their parents'/caregivers' opinions when making serious decisions; however, when they have difficulty talking with them about their problems, they are more likely to experience mental health challenges.<sup>6</sup>

Did you know that extensive research has identified a style of parenting called [“authoritative parenting”](#) (or [“balanced parenting”](#)) [↗](#) that helps protect teens against risks and promotes a healthy transition to adulthood? This guide will familiarize you with this parenting style and provide practical tips for using it in your family. You'll learn how to combine warmth and emotional support with clear limits, which gives teens a safe space to learn healthy decision-making and gain independence as they mature.

Throughout this document, the term “parents and caregivers” includes biological or adoptive parents; guardians; other relatives such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents; and other supportive adults who care for a teen.

Although much of the research cited in this document refers to “parents” or asks adolescents about their “parents,” the research may extend to other types of caregivers.

## WHAT IS AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING?

Researchers have defined four main parenting styles based on their levels of “responsiveness” (warmth and supportiveness) and “demandingness” (rules and firm expectations for mature behavior).<sup>7-8</sup>

**Authoritative parenting** combines high levels of responsiveness with high levels of demandingness. This style of parenting is linked to [many positive outcomes among youth](#), including academic achievement, social competence, emotional health, and reduced levels of risk-taking behavior.<sup>9-19</sup> Authoritative parenting includes:

- Providing emotional support and being attentive to children’s needs
- Being significantly involved in children’s lives
- Setting clear limits and boundaries for behavior
- Having open communication and explaining the reasons behind rules and expectations
- Allowing children to make mistakes and express their opinions
- Helping children solve problems and teaching them to make decisions for themselves
- Encouraging children to gain autonomy and independence progressively as they mature

In contrast, **authoritarian parenting** combines low levels of responsiveness with high levels of demandingness. Authoritarian parents/caregivers expect children to obey rules without question and typically do not explain the reasons for their rules. They may withdraw their affection as a punishment for misbehavior. They are less likely to encourage independence than authoritative parents/caregivers. Children of authoritarian parents/caregivers may have difficulty making decisions on their own.

**Permissive parenting** combines high levels of responsiveness with low levels of demandingness. Permissive parents/caregivers do not tend to set limits or have clear expectations for children and inconsistently enforce rules. Children of permissive parents/caregivers may struggle with understanding and managing their behavior and emotions.

Finally, **neglectful parenting** combines low levels of responsiveness with low levels of demandingness. Neglectful parents/caregivers are uninvolved in their children’s lives and provide little to no support or boundaries.

Level of Responsiveness/ Demandingness	Low Demandingness (Low Expectations)	High Demandingness (High Expectations)
High Responsiveness (High Warmth and Support)	Permissive	Authoritative ✓
Low Responsiveness (Low Warmth and Support)	Neglectful	Authoritarian


# HOW TO PRACTICE AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING AND STRENGTHEN THE PARENT/CAREGIVER-TEEN BOND

Authoritative parenting and closeness go hand in hand. This guide covers six key actions you can take to support a positive relationship with the teen in your life and help them become a confident, competent, and resilient young adult.

## 1. Establish mutual trust.

Trust is a two-way street and is built over time. Both you and the teen in your life need to know you can rely on the other to be honest and dependable. Teens will be more willing to be open and honest with you about their thoughts, experiences, and feelings if you provide a safe, non-judgmental space for them to express themselves. They need to know that you will listen and remain calm, even if you disagree with them or if they make a mistake. Personal space is also very important to teens, so they'll want to know they can count on you to respect their privacy and refrain from telling others about things they want to be kept confidential. If you make a mistake, apologize. It shows you're honest and sets a great example for how you expect them to behave.



Teens may test your limits to gain independence. If this happens, your response should reflect the seriousness of their actions. Consequences could involve removing some privileges related to what they did wrong. Talk about what happened and [give them a chance to earn back your trust](#) .

## 2. Practice open communication.

Open communication is crucial to building a strong relationship with teens and is one of the key elements of authoritative parenting. Communication is a skill, and having good communication requires being intentional about what you say and how you say it. It also involves being a good listener! Here are some strategies you can use to have productive conversations with the teen in your life:



- Ask open questions. Open questions begin with words like “what,” “how,” or “who,” unlike questions that could have a simple “yes” or “no” answer.
- Practice using “I messages”—beginning what you say with “I”—to model how to focus on one’s own feelings and experiences.
- Listen to their concerns and repeat what you hear. Listening can be more important than talking, so listen patiently without interrupting or thinking about what you are going to say next.



- Stay calm and control your emotions. If possible, pick a time to talk when you are both calm and have the energy to talk.
- Focus on the issue at hand without bringing up past mistakes or disagreements.
- Let them know you're always ready to talk about any topic! Teens really DO want to know what parents and caregivers think.

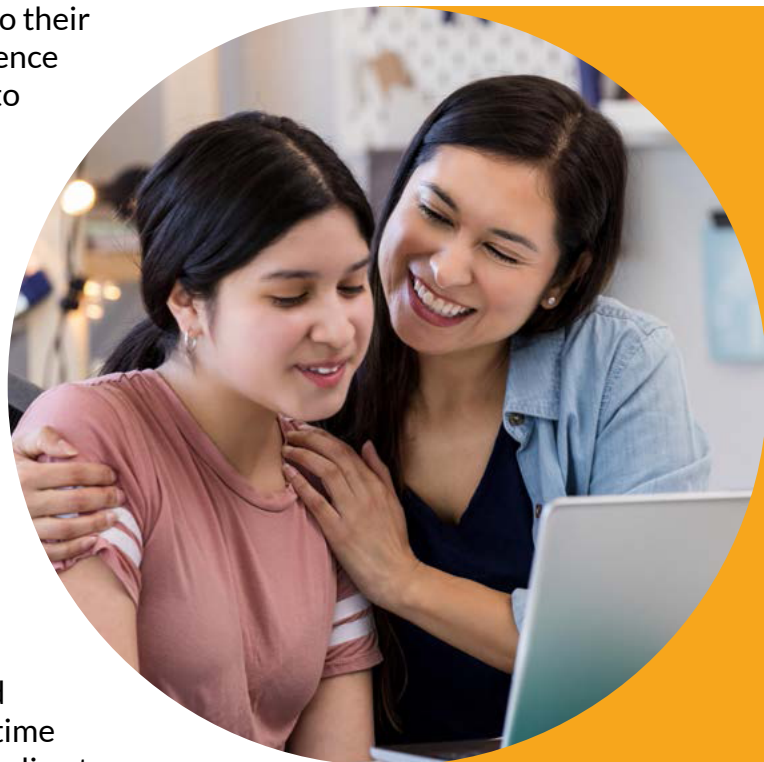
For more information about keeping the lines of communication open with teens, see [7 Expert Tips for Talking with Teens](#).

### 3. Set clear and consistent expectations.

When parents and caregivers are clear about their rules and consistently enforce them, teens know what is expected. If teens have some say in what is expected of them, they will feel respected and will want to hold on to their parents'/caregivers' trust and will probably be more likely to follow the rules. Consider these suggestions for setting reasonable limits and expectations that ensure safety while also promoting closeness and respect:



- Explain the reasons for your rules and expectations. Teens are more likely to follow your rules when they understand the reasons behind them. They need to know your limits are designed to keep them safe and not just to control them.
- Use [logical consequences](#) when the teen in your life breaks a rule. Rather than giving them an unrelated punishment, create logical consequences connected to their behavior. For example, a logical consequence of not doing homework could be having to stay off their phone until homework is done. You can also remind them that there are natural consequences to making mistakes. For example, you could remind them that if they don't do their homework, they will likely get a bad grade in their class. They'll learn to think ahead about the consequences of their behavior.
- Encourage effort over perfection when it comes to expectations about academics and other achievements. [A majority of teens say they feel a lot of pressure to get good grades](#). Too much pressure can affect their self-esteem and mental health. Check in with them from time to time to determine whether they are feeling too much pressure.



#### 4. Encourage gradual independence.

Seeking independence is a normal part of growing up and is necessary for teens to become competent young adults. It's important to strike a balance between monitoring and guiding them and encouraging their independence. To encourage independence while keeping them safe, consider these tips:



- Let them know they will earn more privileges and independence when they behave responsibly.
- Encourage them to solve their own problems but be available for advice if they need it.
- Find ways to give them space to grow and make age-appropriate decisions. When it comes to raising a teen, sometimes you have to pick your battles. As long as they are following your big rules and not jeopardizing their health or safety or making a decision with long-term, negative consequences, it's important to give them some space to make smaller decisions—like wardrobe choices, hair styles, or how to organize their room.
- Challenge them to set their own goals and let them know you're there to support them. They can use these [goal-setting resources from the We Think Twice™ campaign!](#)
- Give them chores and other responsibilities to teach accountability.

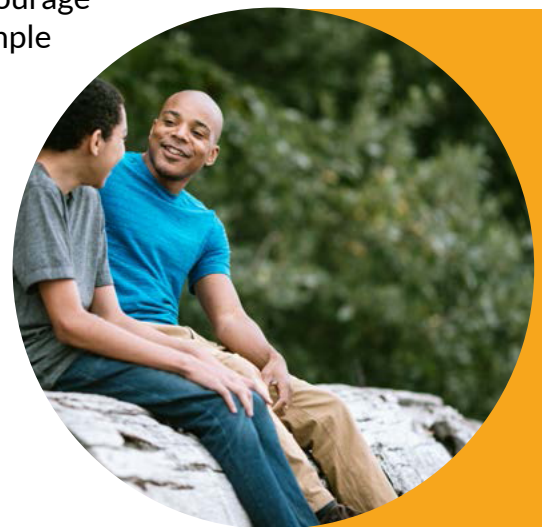
Every teen matures at a different pace. You are the best judge of when the teen in your life is ready for new responsibilities and privileges, so trust your instincts.

#### 5. Be attuned to their emotional and mental health needs.

Teens are undergoing emotional and physical changes associated with puberty and often feel significant stress and pressure related to school, jobs, extracurricular activities, and peer relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these pressures. Parents and caregivers can make a huge difference by letting teens know they have unconditional love and support. The following are some ways you can let them know:



- Take the time to check in with them regularly and encourage them to communicate what they are feeling. Just a simple “how was your day?” lets them know you care.
- Validate their emotions and try to see things from their perspective.
- Catch them doing well. [Praise them for a job well done](#) and recognize the effort they put into reaching their goals. Make a point to celebrate their achievements!
- Let the teens in your life know you appreciate them and accept them for who they are. Remember to thank or compliment them when they do something nice for you or others.





- Encourage the teens in your life to ask for help when they need it and keep an eye out for signs of distress like mood swings, withdrawal, or difficulty sleeping. Let them know you are there for them, no matter what. Seek the help of a mental health professional if needed. For more information, read these tips on [supporting your teen's mental health](#).

## 6. Be involved in their life and find opportunities to connect regularly.

Even though teens tend to seek more independence as they mature, they still want and need a close relationship with their parents and caregivers. You should not interpret normal behavioral changes during adolescence as a desire to disconnect. Research shows teens want to hear what their parents/caregivers have to say about important topics like sex and relationships.<sup>20</sup> Here are some tips for staying involved:



- Take some time every day to give them your full attention, even if it's just a few minutes.
- Plan one-on-one activities with them doing something you both enjoy. The bonds built during fun times make it easier to have serious talks when needed.
- Connect during meal preparation and family meals. Even spending time doing chores together can provide opportunities for relaxed conversations.
- Volunteer at their school or get involved in supporting their extracurricular activities if your schedule permits. Attend events that are open to parents and caregivers like sports, theater performances, dance or chorus recitals, art shows, or debate tournaments.
- Learn about their hobbies and passions. Ask them to teach you about something that excites them.
- Get to know their friends and make your home a welcoming place where they like to hang out.
- Make a point to disconnect from your phone and any other distractions when talking with them—give them your full attention.



Building and maintaining closeness takes ongoing effort. Remember: No parent or caregiver is perfect; the most important thing is to do your best, pay attention to what works and what doesn't, and keep trying. Parenting can be tough, so don't forget to [practice self-care](#) and recharge. You'll have more energy, and your children will benefit. Help is available if you need it! The [National Parent and Youth Helpline](#) provides support and resources from trained parent advocates.


## ACTIVITY: PARENT/CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP QUIZ AND DISCUSSION GUIDE




Use the discussion guide that accompanies this resource, *Strengthening Parent/Caregiver–Teen Relationships: Discussion Guide for Teens and Their Parents/Caregivers*, to talk with the teen in your life about ways you can work together to strengthen your relationship. It includes a link to this short [Parent/Caregiver Relationship Quiz](#) that helps teens discover the strengths and challenges in their relationships with parents, caregivers, and other trusted adults. The quiz is from *We Think Twice*<sup>™</sup>, a movement designed *with* teens, *for* teens, which provides tools and resources to equip and empower teens to form healthy relationships, set goals for the future, make smart decisions, and look out for their mental health.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


[Supporting Your Teen’s Mental Health](#): Tip sheet for parents from the Family and Youth Services Bureau.

[Talking With Teens](#) : Resources from the Center for Parent and Teen Communication, including techniques, tips, and tricks for effective communication. Talking with Teens includes:

- [Parenting When You Want to Explode](#) : Discusses what parents should and should not do to help children learn from their mistakes.
- [Communicating Love Clearly to Teens](#) : Provides examples of the many ways parents can meaningfully demonstrate love for their children.
- [7 Expert Tips for Talking with Teens](#) : Discusses how to control reactions, be a good listener, and offer constructive feedback.

[Parenting That Works](#) : A guide from the Center for Parent and Teen Communication about raising emotionally healthy, academically successful children who will make wiser behavioral decisions.


[Discipline and Monitoring](#) : Resources from the Center for Parent and Teen Communication about setting rules and monitoring teen behavior.

[Parents’ Self Care](#) : Information for parents on practicing self-care from the Center for Parent and Teen Communication.

[Positive Parenting Tips](#): Information from the CDC about child development, positive parenting, safety, and health at each stage of a child’s life.

[Parental Monitoring](#): Information from the CDC about effective monitoring practices for teens.

[Encouraging Teen Independence](#): Video from the CDC about ways parents can encourage teen independence.

[Don’t Forget the Families: The Missing Piece in America’s Effort to Help All Children Succeed](#) : Report from The Search Institute on developmental relationships, including relationship-building tips and activities.

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This guide was created by the *We Think Twice*™ campaign with support from the Family and Youth Services Bureau. It is one of several valuable resources designed for youth-serving professionals as well as parents/caregivers. It is intended to encourage positive youth development by strengthening prevention education and other youth development programs.



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