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Connecting with teens

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I'll never forget the day he arrived on our doorstep, holding his caseworker's hand. His bright red hair matched his boisterous personality. I didn't know that a year later he would become my son.

Now, 16 years later, we strive to stay connected with him, along with his four siblings (also teenagers), amidst a constantly changing culture. Most days it feels we are living in opposite and, at times, opposing worlds. Yet we know for our teenagers to become healthy adults, we must connect with them.

Connecting with our teenage children, who sometimes have strong, independent thoughts of their own, looks a lot different than it did when they were toddlers. As we attempt to make this adjustment, we as parents can slip into beliefs that cause trouble.

One parent might believe, "If I parent strictly enough, I'll control the outcome of my teen's life." Another might think, "If I become friends with my teen, I'll produce the most successful adult." Consider for a moment that a parent's job is not to determine the outcome of your teen's life. Instead, your job is to love, care for, and build a relationship with your child, preparing them for life as an adult.

Through parenting four biological kids, one adopted child, and 15 children in foster care, here's what I've

found: giving them the responsibility for their future as they grow into their teenage years has brought more peace and deepened our relationship.

Instead of fighting about homework, chores, and curfews, we let natural consequences take over, leaving us more room to stay relationally healthy. This connection leads to mutual respect and successful young adults.

Here are a few important ideas to remember when connecting with your teens:

- **It's not about us.** Forget about what you love for a moment and take time to learn what your teen loves. Parents often don't value learning about their teen's hobbies, and teens notice that instantly. Recognize that you're not asked to pick up a new hobby; rather, learn a new way to connect with your teenager.
- **Quality, not quantity.** Spend quality time with your teens. Put down your cell phone and other distractions and connect with your teen through games, talking, or sharing a meal together. If your children are not used to you spending time with them, the first few attempts might be awkward, silent, or even rejected. Be consistent and listen, and this may become their favorite time of the day.

"Parenting teenagers is an exercise in letting go, while holding on with all your heart."

— Michelle Cruz-Rosado

- **Laugh over spilled milk.** Show your children their home is a safe training ground. We all make mistakes, and often that's the best way to learn. Help your teen feel safe, even when they mess up, by calming yourself before responding. If your teen understands and responds well to humor, make a joke and have fun. Most mistakes don't require a lecture.
- **Find the good.** Often when our children return from a long day at school or from an activity, they feel defeated or worn down from negative words they've heard all day. Point out when your teen does well at something, no matter how small. You might think they already know but make a point to tell them anyway in small ways, like, "I love how you helped your friend today," "You did a great job cleaning your room," or "You have a great smile."
- **Be silly.** Life doesn't always have to be serious. Make a point to bring joy into your home through spontaneity. Make a silly face, sing your response to them, dance across the room, turn on crazy dance music, or challenge them to a competition. Make life fun. Joy builds connection and diffuses anger—both theirs and ours. No one is perfect, parenting is hard, and parenting teens some days feels impossible and thankless. Laughter is good for the soul.

Long ago, we all were teenagers. Yet we made it to this wonderful, sometimes terrifying place of adulthood. Erickson's law of expectation states that 85% of what you expect to happen will happen. Positive and negative expectations have the same chance of coming true.

I challenge you today to choose to enjoy your journey with your teenager, try something new, and expect great things for their future!



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All three Post-Adoption Resource Centers have many family fun events planned, as well as support groups and trainings. Please check your Post Adoption Resource Center region's Facebook page or website, watch for monthly calendars, or give us a call to find out what is available near you.

REGION 2

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