

# Family Ties

## Relationships

Family and Consumer Science

Human Development

## Why Marriage Is Important

Despite the high divorce rate and the large number of cohabiting couples, most people in the United States believe they will get married sometime in their lifetime. Most people plan to get married, but they may not be aware of how important marriage can be to them and to their children. Researchers are finding out that marriage has benefits to the couple, to their children, and to society.

Marriage is good for the overall well-being of both men and women. Married men and women score higher on measures of emotional well-being than do those who are divorced, widowed, remarried, or cohabiting. Married men and women report greater emotional sexual satisfaction than cohabiting couples and sexually active single people. And, married men and women have better health than do single, widowed, or divorced men and women.

What about couples who are in unhappy marriages? Researchers studying married couples over a period of time found that the majority of couples who reported that their marriages were awful at the beginning of the research, said their marriages were good or very good five years later. Only 10 percent of the couples who rated their marriages as awful divorced during that five year period. Researchers also studied couples who divorced. They found that, on average, people who divorced were not happier than their unhappy counterparts who remained married.

How does marriage benefit children? Overall, children living with both birth parents fare better academically, socially, emotionally, and financially, than those from single-parent homes, those in stepfamilies, or those in cohabiting families. Children living in cohabiting families and stepfamilies are more likely to be victims of child abuse than are children living with their married birth parents. Living with married birth parents seems to reduce the chances of teens engaging in some risky behaviors, as well.

Marriage is good for society, too. Children who grow up in homes with both of their parents are nearly half as likely as children of single parents to drop out of school, to have trouble finding a job, or to become a teen parent. When children have these problems, they cost the government money in benefits paid to low-income families, fewer taxes paid, and a potential increase in crime.

Marriage is more than a piece of paper. It can benefit the couple, their future children, and society for many years to come.

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# Relationships With Children May Need Changes



Often our relationships with our children center on control and correction. When parents control their children, they are trying to get the children to do things the children don't want to do. Or they are trying to keep the children from doing things they want to do. For example, have you ever tried to force a struggling child into a car seat? Have you ever tried to keep children from eating candy before dinner? Have you tried to get your children to do their homework, eat their vegetables, or stop fighting with each other?

Parents generally have more power than children. We are bigger and stronger. But it's hard to force people to do something they don't want to do. We can spend all of our time yelling at children and trying to bribe, convince, or force them to do what we want them to do. That's the trouble with control. It takes over the relationship. It can be the only thing that parents and their children seem to talk about. And it's not a very good basis for a relationship.

Sometimes our relationships with our children are based on correction. As parents, we spend a lot of time telling our children what they do wrong. Sometimes our correction even becomes insulting. "How can you be so dumb?" "Why can't you do anything right?" "Can't you think?"

Insults are damaging. They do not give children useful information. They only make them feel bad. Even when we avoid insults, too much correction can be bad. Correction should not be the main part of our relationship with our children. There are better things to talk about. So, what can work better than CONTROL and CORRECTION?

The best strategy is to give your children the benefit of the doubt. Give them opportunity! Opportunity is an excellent theme for a relationship. When children want to try something, we may be tempted to tell them "no." But maybe we should find an acceptable way for them to try it.

***"I went to the mall with my baby and my 4-year-old. The 4-year-old wanted to explore the sitting area in the center of the mall. My natural answer was to tell her "later" and hurry on. Instead, I decided to sit with the baby for a few minutes and let my older daughter explore. It only took a few minutes, and she loved it."***

This wise mother took a few minutes to build a positive relationship with her child.

Affection is another excellent theme for a relationship. One good way you can build affection into relationships with your children is by taking time to do things that the children like to do. For example, little Andy loves to hike. Periodically his mother takes him for a hike. Once in a while his dad takes him for a camp out. Andy gets the feeling that his parents really care about him. He feels their affection. Another good way to show affection is to take time to read to and talk with children when you tuck them in at night.

As you change your relationships with your children, be patient with yourself. It takes time to make changes. Keep working at it. When you make a mistake, learn from it. Discover better ways to have a healthy, joyous, positive relationship with your children.

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# Making the Connection with Teens

Communicating with the kids gets more challenging as they get older. Here are some suggestions to improve your relationship with your teenager. As a natural result of following these suggestions, you will discover even more meaningful ways to maintain and deepen the connection with your teen.



## **1. Compliment your teen on a regular basis.**

I have often asked parents to give their teens just one compliment each day for one month and then to record any differences in their relationship with their teens. Without exception, these "compliment prescriptions" have always resulted in an improved relationship at the end of the month. The compliments should not be forced (fake) and do not have to be on a grand scale. Comments like these will work just fine: "Your hair looks great that way. You were really kind to your brother when he lost his Little League game. I like how you rearranged your room; it really reflects your personality. Your toast to Grandma on her birthday was something special. Would you write it down for me? I'd like to keep it in my memory box."

## **2. Don't treat your teen's broken heart in a dismissive or pragmatic manner, like it's no big deal**

"There's plenty of fish in the sea. He didn't deserve you anyway. What can you know about being in love at 15?" Remember when you were a teen how you felt when you got dumped by your first love. Give your teen empathy, understanding, and a soft place to fall.

## **3. Surprise your teen with a scrapbook of pictures**

that you've taken of her, from baby to her present age. If you have them, include a few pictures of you and her together.

**4. Ask your teen if you could share a regular "date" with him every couple of weeks** (or every week if he's game), where the two of you go out for an early Saturday lunch or see a movie. What's most important is your expressing a desire to do something with him.

**5. Involve your teen in some family decisions** - what color to paint the house, which car to purchase, what vegetables and flowers to grow, what fish to put in your aquarium, which vacation spots to visit and what new holiday traditions to create.

**6. Establish a family volunteer tradition**, where you both volunteer together at least once a month at places like a food cupboard, hospice, family shelter, children's hospital or nursing home.

**7. If a family member has Alzheimer's or another degenerative disease, encourage your teen to spend time with her.** Although they may be scared and hesitant to visit, teens do not want to be shut out from seeing family members whom they have loved all their lives. Give them realistic expectations of what to expect (e.g. memory loss) and accompany them if you sense they need your presence.

**8. If your teen has a paying job**, offer to match whatever portion of her paycheck that she wishes to contribute to a charity of her choice.

**9. Write your teen occasional notes** of appreciation, gratitude and love and leave them in sealed envelopes on their pillow.

## **10. Use a picture of your teen or one of you and your teen as your computer's screen saver.**

Consider what that might signify to them. Every time you or she uses your computer, there she is. It's another version of keeping a picture of her in your wallet but with much more visible impact.

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## Child Care Providers. . . . .



## Communicating With Parents

How would you feel leaving your child with someone else for a whole day, before you go to work each day? How would you feel if your child cried when you came at 5 p.m. and didn't want to go home? For a parent already feeling some guilt and resentment, this could kindle real frictions. Clearly this could be a troubling situation.

Your relationship with parents influences the way they view themselves and, more importantly, how children see themselves. If the important people in a child's life are always squabbling, the child may feel insecure and unloved. It means a lot to children to see adults that are important to them working together with courtesy and respect.

Professional providers with good self-esteem "speak no evil." Gossiping or even spending time listening to previous providers' failings is not only detrimental but disastrous. If parents "carry tales," you may be next in the receiving line.

All too often providers' daily relationships with parents hit snags because of differing experiences and beliefs. Pre-enrollment discussions with parents help tremendously in understanding each other, but like all good relationships, they need continuing attention.

Here are some behaviors that providers have found helpful in communicating with parents:

- **Listen carefully to what parents say about their children.**
- **Figure out what they are asking for and why.**
- **Explain your position.**
- **Don't be defensive.**
- **Look for a common ground.**
- **Learn from each other.**

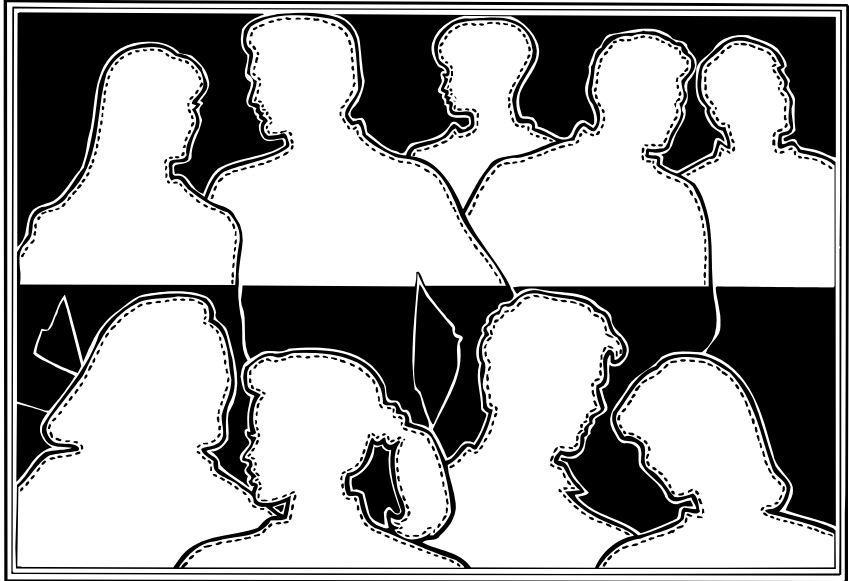
- **Be open to trying out parents' suggestions.**
- **Put yourself in the parents' shoes.**
- **Smile.**
- **Share good events of the day.**
- **Report any accidents and how they happened. Parents are understanding and realize scrapes and bumps occur.**
- **Be available and understanding.**
- **Keep personal information shared by parents confidential.**
- **Don't talk about a child's problem in front of the child. Set up a time to call and discuss the issue.**
- **Continue to talk.**

All this may seem one-sided, with you providing a great deal of awareness of the parents' needs. Remember, of all the people these parents see, you may be the one best able to understand how they feel. There is a specialness that you share. You help them work and pursue a career. In turn, your day care business is possible because their children need your care.

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**For Additional Information Contact  
Your Local County Extension Office**

# The Teen Years



The teen years pose some of the most difficult challenges for families. Teenagers, dealing with hormone changes and an ever-complex world, may feel that no one can understand their feelings, especially parents. As a result, the teen may feel angry, alone and confused while facing complicated issues about identity, peers, sexual behavior, drinking and drugs.

Parents may be frustrated and angry that the teen seems to no longer respond to parental authority. Methods of discipline that worked well in earlier years may no longer have an effect. And, parents may feel frightened and helpless about the choices their teen is making.

As a result, the teen years are ripe for producing conflict in the family. Typical areas of parent-teen conflict may include:

- C     disputes over the teen's curfew**
- C     the teen's choice of friends**
- C     spending time with the family versus with peers**
- C     school and work performance**
- C     cars and driving privileges**
- C     dating and sexuality**
- C     clothing, hair styles and makeup**
- C     self destructive behaviors such as smoking, drinking and using drugs.**

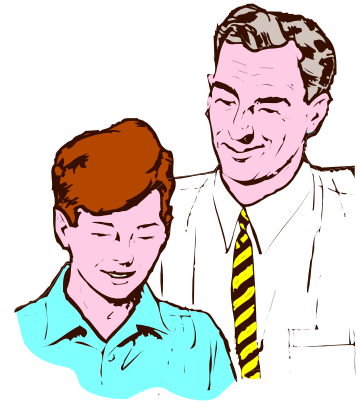
Dealing with the issues of adolescence can be trying for all concerned. But families are generally successful at helping their children accomplish the developmental goals of the teen years -- reducing dependence on parents, while becoming increasingly responsible and independent.

However, there are a number of warning signs that things are not going well and that the family may want to seek outside help. These include aggressive behavior or violence by the teen, drug or alcohol abuse, promiscuity, school truancy, brushes with the law or runaway behavior. Likewise, if a parent is resorting to hitting or other violent behavior in an attempt to maintain discipline, this is a strong danger sign.

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## *Are You an "Askable" Parent. . . .*

### **Kinds of Questions Kids Say They Want to Discuss**



How do I know if I'm in love? Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?

How will I know when I'm ready to have sex? Should I wait until marriage?

Can you get pregnant the first time?

How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?

Will having sex make me popular? Will it make me more grown-up & open up more adult activities to me?

How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?

How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they Safe?

**In addition to being an "askable parent," be a parent with a point of view. Tell you children what you think. Don't be reluctant to say, for example:**

- C I think kids in high school are too young to have sex, especially given today's risks.
- C Whenever you do have sex, always use protection against pregnancy & sexually transmitted diseases until you are ready to have a child.
- C Our family's religion says that sex should be an expression of love within marriage.
- C Finding yourself in a sexually charged situation is not unusual; you need to think about how you'll handle it in advance. Have a plan. Will you say "no?" Will you use contraception? How will you negotiate all this?
- C It's okay to think about sex & to feel sexual desire. Everybody does! But it's not okay to get pregnant/get somebody pregnant as a teenager.
- C One of the many reasons I'm concerned about teens drinking is that it often leads to unprotected sex.
- C (For Boys) Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being able to wait & acting responsibly does.
- C (For Girls) You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship find someone else.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex does not encourage them to become sexually active. And remember, too, that your own behavior should match your words. The "do as I say, not as I do" approach is bound to lose with children & teenagers, who are careful & constant observers of the adults in their lives.

Taken from, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy brochure, Ten Tips For Parents, to help their children avoid teen pregnancy. Visit them online @ [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)

# Handling Conflict in Marriage

Most U.S. citizens value marriage and plan to marry at some point in their lives. But, if you look at the current divorce rate, you may decide that maintaining a marriage can be pretty difficult. So how can couples have successful marriages that last for life? Conflict in a marriage can be an indicator of the quality of the marriage. According to marriage researcher John Gottman, it isn't how often couples have conflict that is important as much as it is how they handle those conflicts. Here are some suggestions, based on his research, for handling conflict in marriage.

- Stop hurtful behaviors early in the relationship. If your spouse does something that is hurtful to you, don't ignore it or try to hurt back. Talk to him or her about it. "I" messages are great for this sort of thing: "I feel (tell how you feel) when you (tell what makes you feel that way); I would like (tell what you want to happen instead)." An example would be "I feel hurt when you make negative remarks about me to your friends, even if you are just teasing. I would like us to commit to saying only positive things about each other to other people."
- Watch your tongue. Couples who avoid the temptation to air every angry thought in a conflict are happier than those who let it all hang out.
- Watch your tone of voice. When you yell or make critical remarks to your spouse, you invite a similar response that can lead to an argument.
- Make a graceful exit. Couples who are successful at handling conflict know how to scale down or exit an argument by finding an area of agreement or understanding ("I know this is hard for you" or "I agree that we need to work on this together"), changing to a completely different subject, introducing humor, or showing appreciation to each other. In successful marriages, having a great relationship is more important than winning an argument.
- Take a break. If an argument gets heated, suggest taking a break and coming back to the issue when both of you have calmed down. However, don't use this as an excuse to avoid addressing the problem.
- Accentuate the positive. In happy marriages, there are five times as many positive statements made to and about each other and the relationship as there are negative statements. Make it a point to say positive things to and about your spouse.
- If you are having problems, get help early. Most couples wait at least six years before seeking help for marital problems. Often, by then it is too late to repair the damage.

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