



Talk Cards

Real words for 13 hard conversations with your teen. Print one, keep it in the car or on the fridge, and use it when the moment comes.

Inside

- 1 When They Won't Talk:** One-word answers and closed doors? Small, steady steps can open the conversation again.
- 2 Alcohol & Drugs:** How to talk about alcohol, vaping, and cannabis so your teen comes to you, not a bottle.
- 3 Online Life & Monitoring:** How to watch over your teen's online life openly, without spying or losing their trust.
- 4 Friend or Parent?:** You can be warm and friendly without giving up being the parent. Here's how to hold both.
- 5 Bad Grades They're Hiding:** How to make it safe for your teen to tell the truth about school, and get them real help.
- 6 Bullying:** Spotting bullying, in person and online, and helping a teen who won't tell you what's happening.
- 7 Puberty & Body Changes:** Simple, calm ways to talk about growing bodies, moods, hygiene, and periods or voice changes.
- 8 Feeling Left Out:** Helping a teen through lost friendships, not fitting in, and comparing themselves online.
- 9 Crushes & Dating:** How to handle first crushes, set fair dating rules, and spot the signs of an unhealthy relationship.
- 10 Sex & Pregnancy:** How to talk about sex early and often, share your values, and stay close if things get real.
- 11 Peer Pressure & the Wrong Crowd:** How to handle friends you worry about, the pull to fit in, and give your teen a safe way out.
- 12 Autism, ADHD & Special Needs:** How to talk in ways that fit your child, and notice when a setback is hitting harder than it looks.
- 13 Getting Outside Help:** Why handing a hard talk to a trained counselor can be an act of love, and how to start.

If your teen is in danger: call **911**. For a mental health crisis, call or text **988** (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). These cards are general guidance for parents, not medical or mental health advice.

When They Won't Talk

When your teen has gone quiet and you can't reach them · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Remind yourself this is not a rejection of you. It is part of growing up.
- Let go of needing a big talk. Aim for small moments instead.
- Pick side-by-side times, like car rides, walks, cooking, or shooting hoops. Less eye contact feels safer.
- Notice when they tend to talk, often late at night, and be available then.

Things you can say

"I miss hanging out with you. Want to grab food later, just us?"

"You don't have to talk. I'm just glad to be here with you."

"Tell me one good thing and one annoying thing about today."

"Do you want me to just listen, or do you want my help?"

"That sounds really hard. Tell me more."

"I didn't handle our argument well. I'm sorry, and I'd like to try again."

Try not to

- Firing off question after question, because it feels like an interview
- Jumping in to fix things, because they wanted to be heard
- Lecturing when they finally share, because they'll stop sharing
- Bringing up old mistakes, because it reopens old wounds
- Taking their silence personally, because it adds guilt

By age

10–12: Kids this age still enjoy your time, so build habits now like bedtime chats and car rides. Small daily check-ins make it easier to talk later.

13–15: Pulling away often starts now, so don't take it personally. Use side-by-side time, ask fewer questions, and be around when they tend to talk.

16–18: Treat them more like a young adult and respect their privacy. Invite them out for food or errands, and let them know you are always there.

Where to get help

CDC Essentials for Parenting Teens. Free CDC guide for parents of 11 to 17 year olds, with tips on communication and coaching teens through emotions.

HealthyChildren.org Teen Section. Advice on teen development and mental health from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Alcohol & Drugs

When you worry they're drinking, vaping, or using · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Calm your own body first. Take a walk or a few slow breaths so fear does not do the talking.
- Pick a low-pressure moment, like a car ride, a walk, or cooking together.
- Decide what you want most: to learn what is going on, not to win the argument.
- Don't ambush them in front of siblings or friends.

Things you can say

"I'm not here to yell. I want to understand what's going on with you."

"A lot of kids think vaping is no big deal. What do you hear at school?"

"Your brain is still growing until your mid-twenties, and I want to protect it."

"If you're ever at a party and feel unsafe, text me. I'll come get you, no lecture that night."

"What would you say if someone offered you a vape or a drink?"

"Even if you mess up, I still want you to tell me. I can handle it."

"Our rule is no alcohol, vaping, or weed. I'm saying it because I love you."

Try not to

- Scare stories or exaggerated facts, because teens tune them out
- Searching their room first and asking later, because it breaks trust fast
- Name-calling their friends, because they will defend them
- Joking about your own past drinking, because it sends mixed signals
- Ending the talk in anger, because it closes the door

By age

10–12: Start early with simple facts about how alcohol, vapes, and drugs affect a growing brain. Practice easy ways to say no, and make clear they can always come to you.

13–15: This is when many teens first see vaping or drinking at school or parties. Ask what they hear, set clear rules, and set up a pickup plan with no lecture that night.

16–18: Talk openly about driving, parties, and real risks like mixing substances. Give more freedom as trust grows, and keep your no-questions ride home promise strong.

Where to get help

SAMHSA National Helpline. Free, confidential, 24/7 treatment referral and information, in English and Spanish. Call 1-800-662-4357.

Partnership to End Addiction Parent Helpline. Free, confidential one-on-one help for parents in English and Spanish. Call 1-855-378-4373 or text CONNECT to 55753.

NIDA for Parents & Educators. Plain facts from the National Institute on Drug Abuse on vaping, cannabis, alcohol, and conversation starters.

Online Life & Monitoring

When you want to know what's happening on their phone · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Learn the basics of the apps they use. Ask them to show you, or look them up yourself.
- Decide what you will monitor and why, and plan to tell them.
- Pick a calm time to talk, like a drive or while making dinner, not right after a fight.
- Think about your own phone habits, because they are watching yours too.

Things you can say

“Show me your favorite app. What do you like about it?”

“I’m going to use some safety settings on your phone, and I’ll tell you exactly what I can see.”

“This isn’t about not trusting you. It’s about the people online I can’t trust.”

“Let’s write a family tech agreement together, with rules for me too.”

“If anyone ever sends you something that feels wrong or asks for pictures, come to me. You won’t be in trouble.”

“As you show me you can handle more, you’ll get more freedom.”

Try not to

- Secretly reading every message, because they will find out
- Taking the phone away for telling you something scary, because they’ll stop telling you
- Setting rules you don’t follow yourself, because it feels unfair
- Using a monitoring app instead of talking, because tools can be bypassed
- Making fun of their online world, because it matters to them

By age

10–12: Use more parental controls now, and keep phones and tablets in shared spaces. Explore apps together and teach them never to share personal details with strangers.

13–15: Loosen some controls as trust grows, and tell them what you can see. Talk about group chats, sharing photos, and what to do if someone makes them feel uneasy.

16–18: Move toward trust and fewer controls, since they will soon manage this alone. Talk about their digital footprint, scams, and staying safe when meeting online friends.

Where to get help

NCMEC CyberTipline. Report online sexual exploitation or anyone pressuring a child for pictures. Report online or call 1-800-843-5678, 24 hours a day.

NetSmartz from NCMEC. Free online safety videos, tip sheets, and talk guides for families.

Common Sense Media Guide to Parental Controls. Plain guides to setting up controls on phones, apps, and games.

Friend or Parent?

When you're not sure whether to be their friend or their parent · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Ask yourself what your own parents did, and what you want to keep or change.
- Choose two or three rules that matter most and be ready to explain why.
- Talk with any other caregiver so you are on the same page.
- Pick a calm moment, like a walk or a drive, not in the middle of a fight.

Things you can say

"I love hanging out with you. And sometimes I still have to be your mom or dad."

"I know you're upset with me. I can live with that, because keeping you safe matters more."

"You can always tell me anything. I might not like it, but I'll still listen."

"Here's the rule, and here's why it matters to me."

"What do you think is a fair consequence if this rule gets broken?"

"I was wrong to snap at you earlier. The rule still stands, but I'm sorry for how I said it."

Try not to

- Needing them to like you all the time, because limits will slip
- Leaning on them for your adult problems, because it's too heavy
- Changing rules when you're tired, because it teaches pushing works
- Only showing up to correct them, because warmth builds trust
- Gossiping about their friends with them, because it blurs the line

By age

10–12: Kids this age still need clear rules and lots of warmth. Explain the why behind rules in simple words, and enjoy fun time together.

13–15: Expect pushback as they test limits. Stay kind and firm, keep a few key rules steady, and invite them to help shape some of the others.

16–18: Slowly shift from boss to coach as they get ready for adult life. Keep safety limits firm, and let them make more choices and learn from them.

Where to get help

CDC Essentials for Parenting Teens. Free CDC guide for parents of 11 to 17 year olds on praise, independence, and handling emotions.

HealthyChildren.org Teen Section. Parenting advice for the teen years from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Bad Grades They're Hiding

When you find out they've been hiding bad grades · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Take a day if you need it. Talk when you are calm, not when you first see the grade.
- Pick a low-pressure moment, like a car ride or a walk, not in front of siblings.
- Look at the whole picture first. Which classes, and when did it start to slip?
- Remind yourself the grade is a problem to solve together, not a verdict on your child.

Things you can say

"I saw your grades online. I'm not here to yell. I want to understand what's going on."

"I'm more upset that you felt you couldn't tell me than about the grade itself."

"What part of this class feels hardest right now?"

"Is something else going on, like sleep, friends, or stress, that's making school harder?"

"You are not in trouble for telling me the truth. We'll figure out a plan together."

"Would it help if we talked to your teacher together, or would you rather try first?"

Try not to

- Yelling or taking the phone right away, because it teaches them to hide better
- Comparing them to a sibling or cousin, because it deepens the shame
- Calling them lazy, because it's rarely the real reason
- Punishing the honesty along with the grade, or they'll stop telling you
- Fixing everything yourself, because they need to own the plan

By age

10–12: Sit with them to check assignments and help build simple habits like a homework spot and a set time. Praise effort more than the grade.

13–15: Classes get harder and hiding gets easier. Check the portal together, ask what feels hard, and help them learn to talk to teachers themselves.

16–18: Let them lead and own the plan, with you as backup. Connect grades to their own goals, like graduation, college, a trade, or a job.

Where to get help

Understood.org. Free nonprofit resources for parents on learning and thinking differences like ADHD and dyslexia, including how to work with your child's school.

Bullying

When you think your teen is being bullied · Ages 10–12, 13–15

Before you talk

- Get calm first. Your teen will watch how you react.
- Choose a quiet, private moment, like a drive or a late-night snack.
- Decide ahead that you will listen before you make any calls.
- Know that taking away their phone can feel like a punishment for being hurt.

Things you can say

“You seem down after school lately. I’m here if something is going on.”

“Nobody deserves to be treated badly. This is not your fault.”

“I won’t do anything behind your back. We’ll decide next steps together.”

“If it’s happening online, you won’t lose your phone for telling me.”

“Can you show me what they’ve been sending or saying?”

“Who at school do you feel safe with?”

Try not to

- Telling them to just ignore it, which makes them feel unheard
- Storming into the school without them, which can break their trust
- Confronting the other child or their parents, which can escalate things
- Asking what they did to cause it, which puts blame on them
- Promising total secrecy, since you may need to act

By age

10–12: Ask simple questions about recess, lunch, and the bus, and watch for stomachaches or not wanting to go to school. At this age, it is fine to work closely with the teacher.

13–15: Bullying often moves online and into group chats now. Promise they won’t lose their phone for telling you, and decide next steps together.

16–18: Older teens may call it drama and want to handle it alone. Respect that, but step in if it involves threats, sharing private images, or their safety.

Where to get help

StopBullying.gov. The federal government’s site on bullying and cyberbullying, with warning signs and steps for parents.

PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center. Free guides for parents on helping your child, working with the school, and online safety.

Puberty & Body Changes

When their body starts changing and you're not sure what to say · Ages 10–12, 13–15

Before you talk

- Get your own facts straight so you feel calm. A trusted medical site helps.
- Keep it short. Many small talks work better than one big one.
- Use side-by-side times, like car rides or cooking, so there is less eye contact.
- Have supplies ready, like deodorant, pads, or a razor, so it feels practical.

Things you can say

“Your body is going to change a lot over the next few years. That’s normal, and everyone goes through it.”

“You can ask me anything. If I don’t know, we’ll look it up together.”

“I put some deodorant in the bathroom for you. It’s a grown-up thing we all use.”

“Getting your period is a healthy part of growing up. Let’s put a kit in your backpack just in case.”

“Your voice might crack for a while. It’s just your body growing, and it settles down.”

“Everyone grows at a different speed. Your body is right on its own schedule.”

Try not to

- Teasing about their body or voice, even as a joke
- Commenting on weight or shape, which can hurt body image
- Making it a big serious sit-down, which makes it awkward
- Only talking to them about their own gender, since both need the facts
- Brushing off moods as just hormones, which feels dismissive

By age

10–12: Talk before changes start, using correct body words and simple facts. Keep supplies ready, like deodorant and pads, and keep talks short and calm.

13–15: Changes are in full swing, so focus on hygiene, moods, and body image. Give more privacy, and let them know they can still ask you anything.

16–18: Most changes are done, but questions about bodies, health, and self-image can remain. Help them start handling their own doctor visits and health care.

Where to get help

HealthyChildren.org from the American Academy of Pediatrics. Pediatrician-reviewed articles for parents on puberty for boys and girls.

KidsHealth from Nemours. Easy-to-read articles on puberty and growing up, with sections for parents, kids, and teens.

Feeling Left Out

When your teen feels lonely or left out · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Remember you don't need to solve it. Listening is the main job.
- Choose a relaxed time, like a walk, a drive, or making dinner together.
- Think about your own teen years. It can help to share a short story.
- Watch your own worry so it doesn't come out as pressure.

Things you can say

"You've seemed a little down lately. Want to talk, or just hang out?"

"That sounds lonely. I'm sorry it's been so hard."

"Friendships change a lot at your age. It doesn't mean something is wrong with you."

"Social media only shows the best moments. It's not the whole story."

"Is there anything you'd like to try, like a club, a team, or inviting someone over?"

"I really like spending time with you. You matter a lot to me."

Try not to

- Saying just go make new friends, which makes it sound easy
- Blaming the other kids harshly, which can backfire later
- Pushing them into activities they dread, which adds stress
- Brushing it off as normal, which can feel dismissive
- Scrolling their accounts in secret, which can break trust

By age

10–12: Friend groups often shift in the middle school years. Help them find one or two good friends through clubs, sports, or a playdate you set up.

13–15: Social media can make being left out feel much worse. Listen more than you fix, and gently talk about how posts only show the best moments.

16–18: Treat their feelings like an adult's and let them choose their own steps. Watch for sadness that lasts, and help them find support if it does.

Where to get help

NAMI HelpLine. Free support and information for families about mental health. Call 1-800-950-6264 or text NAMI to 62640, weekdays 10 AM to 10 PM Eastern.

Crisis Text Line. Free, confidential, 24/7 support by text. Text HOME to 741741.

Crushes & Dating

When your child starts liking someone · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Decide your family's dating rules ahead of time, such as age, group dates first, and where they can go
- Take a breath and remember your own first crush
- Pick a relaxed moment, like a car ride, a walk, or cooking together
- Don't tease them or bring it up in front of siblings or friends

Things you can say

"I noticed you've been texting someone a lot. Tell me about them."

"It's normal to like someone. I'm glad you're growing up."

"What do you like most about them?"

"A good partner makes you feel safe and respected, not scared or small."

"You can say no to anything that doesn't feel right, and so can they."

"Here are our family rules for dating, and here's why they matter to me."

"If anything ever feels off, you can tell me. I won't freak out."

Try not to

- Teasing or making fun of the crush, because it shuts them down
- Banning all talk of dating, which pushes it underground
- Criticizing the person they like, since they'll defend them harder
- Reading their messages in secret, because it breaks trust fast
- Ignoring red flags as puppy love, since abuse can start young

By age

10–12: Crushes at this age are mostly about feelings, not dating. Stay warm, don't tease, and talk about what a kind friend or partner looks like.

13–15: Share your family's dating rules, like group outings first and knowing where they are. Talk about respect, jealousy, and pressure, both in person and online.

16–18: Give more freedom with clear check-ins as trust grows. Talk openly about healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, and knowing when to walk away.

Where to get help

Love is Respect. Free, confidential support for teens and parents, 24/7. Call 1-866-331-9474, text LOVEIS to 22522, or chat online.

HealthyChildren.org: Signs of Teen Dating Violence. Warning signs and tips for parents from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Sex & Pregnancy

When it's time to talk about sex · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Get clear on your own values and what you want your teen to know
- Learn the basic facts about consent, protection, and pregnancy so you feel ready
- Pick a calm time, like a drive, a walk, or doing dishes side by side
- Keep it short and plan to come back to it

Things you can say

"I know this is awkward. It's awkward for me too, but you matter more than my comfort."

"In our family, here's what we believe about sex and relationships, and here's why."

"Whatever you decide, I want you to have the facts so you stay safe."

"Consent means both people freely say yes, and anyone can change their mind at any time."

"No one should ever pressure you, and you should never pressure anyone."

"You can ask me anything. If I don't know, we'll find out together."

"Whatever happens, you can come to me. I will still love you."

Try not to

- Waiting for one big talk, because small talks work better
- Using fear or shame, since it makes teens hide
- Assuming they already know, because friends share myths
- Yelling if they share something hard, which ends the talk
- Making choices for them in a crisis, since they need to be heard

By age

10–12: Focus on body basics, healthy friendships, and your family's values. Teach that their body belongs to them and that they should tell you if anyone makes them uncomfortable.

13–15: Talk about consent, respect, and pressure, both in person and online. Share your values, answer questions calmly, and give simple facts about pregnancy and staying safe.

16–18: Be clear and practical about consent, protection, and pregnancy. Share your values, but make sure they know they can always come to you for help.

Where to get help

HealthyChildren.org: Dating & Sex. Parent guides on sex, consent, birth control, and pregnancy from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

HHS Office of Population Affairs: Tips for Parents and Caregivers of Teens. Federal guidance on talking with teens about relationships and sexual health.

Peer Pressure & the Wrong Crowd

When you worry about the friends they choose · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Separate true danger from friends who are just different from you
- Remember how much fitting in mattered when you were their age
- Pick an easy moment, like a car ride or a late-night snack
- Come ready to ask about their friends, not attack them

Things you can say

“Tell me about your friends. What do you like about them?”

“Invite them over any time. I’d love to get to know them.”

“It’s hard when everyone else is doing something and you’re not.”

“You don’t have to go along with anything that feels wrong.”

“If you ever need out, text me an X. I’ll call with an emergency and come get you, no questions asked.”

“You can always blame me. Tell them your parents would ground you forever.”

“I trust you, and I want to help you stay safe.”

Try not to

- Banning friends outright, since it drives things underground
- Insulting their friends, because they will defend them
- Grilling them every time they come home, which builds walls
- Breaking the no-questions promise, since trust is lost for good
- Comparing them to other kids, because it stings

By age

10–12: Get to know their friends and friends’ parents now. Practice simple ways to say no, and start the X plan early so it feels normal.

13–15: The pull to fit in is strongest now. Welcome their friends into your home, ask more than you judge, and keep the X plan ready.

16–18: Pressure may involve cars, parties, or relationships. Trust their judgment more, talk through real situations, and keep the no-questions ride home promise.

Where to get help

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: Peer Pressure. Facts for Families guide on helping kids handle peer pressure.

Autism, ADHD & Special Needs

When your child thinks, learns, or feels things differently · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Pick a calm, quiet spot with little noise, and a time when they are not tired or hungry.
- Plan a short talk around the one or two things you most want to say.
- Give a heads up, like we'll talk after dinner, so the talk is not a surprise.

Things you can say

"I want to talk about something. You are not in trouble."

"Take your time. I can wait while you think."

"One bad grade does not mean you are bad at school. It means we need a new plan."

"You can text me or write it down if that feels easier than talking."

"Tell me about the game you're into. I want to know what you like about it."

"Sometimes when people feel this upset, they think about not wanting to be alive. Have you had thoughts like that?"

Try not to

- Asking many questions at once, because it can overwhelm them
- Using hints, sarcasm, or figures of speech, because they may be taken literally
- Saying it's no big deal, because it feels big to them
- Changing plans without warning, because surprises can add stress
- Keeping talk of dying to yourself, because they need more support

By age

10–12: Use clear, simple words and give them time to answer. Keep routines steady, warn them before changes, and build calm talk habits around their favorite interests.

13–15: School and friendships get harder, and setbacks can hit deeply now. Check in often, let them text or write if talking is hard, and stay close with teachers.

16–18: Invite them to help lead their IEP or 504 meetings and plan for life after high school. Keep checking in, since big changes can bring big stress.

Where to get help

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Free, confidential support 24/7 for anyone in crisis or worried about someone. Call or text 988, or chat online.

Autism Society National Helpline. Free information and referral for autistic people and families. Call 1-800-328-8476 to find services and support near you.

CHADD. The national nonprofit for ADHD, with parent support groups and a help line at 1-866-200-8098, weekday afternoons, in English and Spanish.

Center for Parent Information and Resources. Find your state's free Parent Training and Information Center for help with IEPs, 504 plans, and working with your child's school.

Getting Outside Help

When it's time to bring in a counselor or therapist · Ages 10–12, 13–15, 16–18

Before you talk

- Calm yourself first, and remind yourself that asking for help is love, not failure.
- Know your options. A school counselor, your child's doctor, a licensed therapist or counselor, or a psychiatrist, who is a medical doctor and can prescribe medicine.
- Find a place to start. Ask your child's doctor for a referral, call the number on the back of your insurance card, or ask the school counselor for names.

Things you can say

"I've noticed you're carrying a lot lately, and I don't want you to carry it alone."

"Talking to a counselor doesn't mean something is wrong with you. It means you deserve support."

"You don't have to tell me everything. I just want you to have someone safe to talk to."

"I'm not handing you off. I'll still be right here."

"What you say to a counselor stays mostly private. They only share if someone's safety is at risk."

"If the first person isn't a good fit, we can try someone else."

Try not to

- Calling counseling a punishment, because it makes help feel shameful
- Asking the therapist to report everything back, because it breaks your teen's trust
- Telling them not to share family business, because it silences what hurts
- Pulling them out when sessions get uncomfortable, because staying is where healing happens
- Waiting until things get worse, because early help works better

By age

10–12: Kids this age often show worry through stomachaches, sleep trouble, or big feelings. Start with their doctor or school counselor, and explain that a counselor is a helper for feelings.

13–15: Many teens open up more easily to a trusted adult outside the family. Let them help choose the counselor, and respect that most of what they share stays private.

16–18: Older teens should have a real say in their own care. Offer to help make the first call, and remind them that asking for help is a strength they can carry into adult life.

Where to get help

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Free, confidential support 24/7 for anyone in emotional distress or crisis. Call or text 988, or chat online. Text and chat are also offered in Spanish.

SAMHSA National Helpline. Free, confidential, 24/7 referrals for mental health and substance use help, in English and Spanish. Call 1-800-662-4357, or search for care near you on [FindTreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov).

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline. Counselors help parents, caregivers, and teens with worries about abuse, 24/7, in over 170 languages. Call or text 1-800-422-4453.

National Domestic Violence Hotline. Free, confidential support 24/7 if there is violence or fear at home. Call 1-800-799-7233, text START to 88788, or chat online.