

# Ensuring Strong Connections for Teens

## Making Connections With Family and Others

Adolescence is a time of rapid development rivaled only by the first few years of life. Our children go through so many emotional and physical changes during this time that it is easy for them to feel unsure. Yet the enduring connections they have with friends and family form the blanket of security they need to become their best selves.

The [most protective force](#) in our children's lives is the connection they have with family — its proven by research and rings true to our real-life experiences. Family connections are critical, but young people also reap benefits from multiple layers of connections. That includes relationships with caring adults in their schools, after school programs, communities, and faith-based organizations. The more healthy connections, the better.

Human connection and the ability to get through things together allow us to recover from challenging times. Solid connections allow us to be vulnerable because we know we can turn to others who genuinely care. We would do the same for them if and when they needed us.

Connection also lets us more fully celebrate joyous times. For teens, it allows them to try new things and be exposed to opportunities that will develop their skills and build their confidence. When our adolescents are surrounded by many protective connections they will continue to seek other healthy relationships throughout their lives and will build strong families of their own. Connection is one of seven critical elements for building resilience within our children.

## The 7 Cs of Resilience

In addition to connection, [coping](#), [confidence](#), [competence](#), [contribution](#), [character](#), and [control](#) make up the the [7 Cs of Resilience](#). These [essential](#) elements for positive youth development give parents a way to frame how to raise successful tweens and teens able to thrive in both good and difficult times. They are described fully in [Building Resilience in Children and Teens](#). When taken together, they strengthen families and empower teens. The connections between the Cs are powerful, each building upon each other. Just as our connection to others enriches us to be better than we could be alone.

We loved our children from the moment they were born. And, our presence in their lives forms the root of their security. However, it is more than our physical presence that offers them security. It is *how* we see them.

Parents' knowledge of their teens' strengths is deeply protective. It is our love that offers them a solid sense of self.

## **Seeing Our Children as They Deserve To be Seen**

Teens feel pressure to "find" themselves. They are working to answer the difficult question, "[Who am I?](#)" They are routinely judged. Schools, teams, and organized groups evaluate their performance. Peers determine whether or not they fit in. This can be stressful and can pressure teens into doing what it takes to fit in. But how families see them forms the basis of how they see themselves.

Parents' knowledge of their teens' strengths is deeply protective. It is our love that offers them a solid sense of self. What is love? Love is seeing someone as they really are. As they deserve to be seen. Not based on a temporary behavior, or by what they might produce. Loving is different than "liking." It's ok if we don't like everything our tweens and teens do. Loving is an active, thoughtful process. When others narrowly define our teens' worth we must remind them they are good to the core. Because family members also see the faults, it makes noticing the positive even more

powerful.

## Creating a Safe Place to Feel

Resilient people can feel fully, even when they feel uncomfortable. Experiencing emotions allows people to move forward. The basis of how your teens will manage emotions throughout their lives is established at home. It is there they learn to share instead of hold back feelings. It is there they learn that experiencing emotions is a sign of strength instead of weakness. It is there they learn that vulnerability creates an opportunity to draw strength from others.

Teens [who grow up in caring homes learn to care](#). They learn whether they are listened to or whether adults brush aside their thoughts and feelings. Expressing something like, "I want to better understand how you're feeling. Please tell me so I can try to help," goes a long way. This kind of open, honest communication strengthens relationships and makes it more likely our teens will come to us for guidance. Sometimes our children's problems may seem unimportant or overblown and we may be tempted to say, "Get over it," or "It's not a big deal." But when we belittle or dismiss them in this way, we discourage them from coming back to us as a valued resource. Instead, we must hear them and be sensitive to their feelings. When we do, our teens learn to listen to their own emotions and benefit from recognizing and expressing their feelings.

We want our children to be able to connect to their emotions. Even unpleasant emotions inform us how to successfully navigate the world. Anxiety tells us when we should be cautious. Sadness reminds us that we care. Anger warns us that someone has violated our boundaries, and we may need to defend ourselves. This is the kind of self-awareness that builds confident, capable young people.

## Connections Take Work

Many things can get in the way of our ideal connections. Not all parents live with their children. Our lives are busy. Sometimes what we are doing to provide for our children (like working!) means that we have less available time for them. Their schedules also may become busier during adolescence, leaving less time for us. Finally, in this increasingly tech-driven world, our teens may occasionally turn away from family as the primary source of connection.

The good news is that it is the quality, rather than the quantity of our connections that really matters. When young people feel really listened to, for even a short time, it holds tremendous value. Consider having a [technology-free dinner together every week](#). Or schedule an event — game night, a weekly walk, or make your own pizza night — that clearly states this is “our” time. If you want them to be enthusiastic about the time together, let them choose the activity. If you do not live with your child, make technology your friend. Use video chats, email, text or social media to maintain, and even strengthen, meaningful relationships across a distance.

#### DOWNLOAD THE PDF

*Supporting Connections to Build Resilience in Teens*

Parents can support adolescents to gain the protection that comes from strong, secure connections in the home and beyond.

## Connections Beyond our Families

In infancy and early childhood, parents are the center of their children’s world. (And it feels good!) As our children grow it is critical they are part of an ever-widening circle. Connections to educational, civic, spiritual, athletic, recreational, and artistic groups can increase their sense of belonging to a larger world.

Peer connections prepare them for the world of work and ultimately to find life partners. School engagement is critical to academic success. Other caring adults they meet may offer them exposure to life’s possibilities.

It is also important that we encourage our teens to forge connections that build strong communities. It is often said, the future will be built on well-worn paths between neighbors. It is our reaching out to those who might hold different views that ensures our continued success as a nation. The root of connection in our communities is not really that different than it is in strong families — it is about respectful listening, empathy, and seeing people in their best light, as they deserve to be seen.

## **Independence or Interdependence?**

We want our adolescents to grow to become self-sufficient and independent. But independence must not mean isolation or disconnection. Our goal must be [interdependence](#) across generations.

When we honor our teens growing independence during adolescence, rather than trying to control them, they will choose to maintain warm, secure connections with us. The secret is in [maintaining a secure connection, even as they temporarily push us away](#) as they learn to stand on their own.