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## 4 things teens really need from their parents

*They may want a new car, but money can't buy what they truly need.*



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Teens may beg for money, new clothes, a car or a later curfew. But those aren't the things they need most from their parents. (Photo: Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock)

During the teen years, as activities and academics ramp up, parents and teens get so busy they become proverbial ships passing in the dining room. Dinners become fragmented and communication only occurs on the fly — and at a time when teens need the connection with their parents most. Of course, this is also the time teens are pushing the hardest for more independence and space. It's not an easy time for anyone.

During the teen years, kids are at greater risk for depression and anxiety. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), depression is the most common mental health disorder among teens and adults, and 10 to 15 percent of teens have symptoms of depression at any given time.

Though teens have a reputation for being sad or angsty, that isn't necessarily a sign of depression. According to research by neuroscientist and [pediatrician Ronald Dahl](#), teens experiment with intense negative emotions, and they don't need you to cajole them out of their feelings. In fact, learning how to cope with intense emotions is helpful.

Barbara Greenberg, PhD, teen clinical psychologist and author of "[Teenage as a Second Language: A Parent's Guide to Becoming Bilingual](#)" explains that teens can experience distress without being depressed, so it's important not to over-label. However, she says, some kids need help identifying the difference, because sometimes kids have trouble labeling feelings.

So what do teens most need from us? Here's what Greenberg says parents can provide:

**Our presence.** "Teens perceive their parents as less available than parents perceive themselves," she says. It's important to be physically present in a mindful way, at least part of the time — meaning focused, not tapping on your computer or phone. Just like with anyone else, you look unavailable to your kids when you're engaged with a screen. Doing household chores or just being around signifies in a different way that we're present.

**Good listening skills.** Teens talk more if we don't overreact or freak out when they tell us something. Even interrupting can shut down a teen. When they tell us something scary or upsetting, "parents panic and start to correct rather than connect," Greenberg says. "But the goal is to listen to get information, and you don't want to shut them off by interrupting, by panicking, or by giving them the message you can't handle it." A child won't talk if she thinks a parent can't handle the conversation, which conveys the unintended message that the child can't handle it either. Put on your poker face and stay calm.

**Guidance, not advice.** Skipping advice is key to helping teens open up and helping them develop problem-solving skills. Listen as they weigh how to handle a situation by letting them talk it through, and avoid your own suggestions unless they've expressly asked for them. Teens often want to use you as a sounding board only, so try open-ended questions to facilitate thinking through how to handle a situation.

**Teen-paced conversations.** "Teens feel very much out of control — their bodies are changing and they're developing their identity — so it's important to give them a sense of control over the rate and pace at which they disclose information," Greenberg says. They'll talk when they're ready, on their terms. You can influence conversations, however, by being available for situations that promote opening up, such as taking a drive or a walk together, watching a show together or staying up late so you cross paths in the kitchen for midnight snacks.

### What to watch for






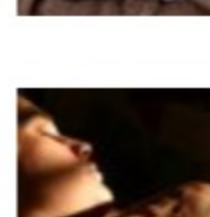


Though kids may be sad or angsty during their teen years, that isn't necessarily a sign of depression. (Photo: Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock)


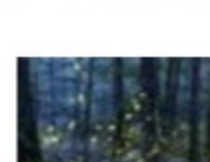
A teen being private is not a sign of depression. That's a healthy sign of adolescence, Greenberg says. She'd worry more if a teen was clingy and wanted to tell you everything. But keep an eye on other behaviors such as a social teen becoming isolated, changes in sleep patterns or a shift in school performance. Don't assume a child getting straight A's is just fine — top performance isn't a good barometer of emotional well-being. Depression's danger zone is when a person feels hopeless and helpless for a period beyond two weeks.

It's helpful to be aware that male and female depression can present differently. Girls tend to internalize and act sad, while boys more typically act out through behaviors like getting angry, punching a wall or going drinking. She recommends making sure kids have a social support network of confidants, possibly a therapist the family works with periodically or an extended family member who reaches out to your child. Everyone does better with at least one person who "gets them." Teach your kids it's not shameful to ask for help. Many kids fake their feelings because they fear disappointing their parents more than they do angering them.

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