



Family Communication Resource Guide



michigan organization on
adolescent sexual health





Introduction:

— Research shows that it is important for parents/caregivers to have knowledge about their adolescent child's activities, social contacts, and location, as well as having clear parenting rules and supervision. We also know that young people have the right to autonomy and independence. We know these are conversations that can be complicated and families have different dynamics - this is a tool to help with the ongoing process. This resource is not designed as an "end all be all," but rather as a starting point for a lifelong process to promote healthy communication.

Tips for youth:

- **Ask if parents are willing to have the conversation.**
 - This gives them a heads-up that you are interested in talking. It also gives them an opportunity to assess whether they're in a place where they can effectively talk about important topics like curfew, who can be in the car when you are driving, sex, staying overnight with friends, or something else you need to talk with a trusted adult about (like where you are allowed to drive, being a "closer" at work, housesitting with a friend, going to the clinic for contraception, concern about a friend who is engaging in risky behavior, etc.).
- **Have the conversation in a relaxed environment.**
 - For example: in the car, on a walk, at dinner, etc. where neither of you feels rushed, stressed, and/or distracted. Suggest a place that you're most comfortable with!
 - If it's a first-time conversation, it may be best to schedule it for a time when both of you are available to give your full attention to the conversation.
- **Give them a chance to share their perspective.**
 - Ask them to share what their attitudes were about family communication when they were younger vs. their attitudes now.
 - This gives them the opportunity to remember that they, too, used to be a teen, and remembering may make it easier for them to relate to you and better understand where you're coming from.
- **It's okay if the first conversation doesn't go as well as you hoped** - sometimes people need time. You can try again another time!

Tips for parents:

- **First, spend time thinking about why you have certain expectations** (is it because you're afraid of something happening to them? Is it because that's what your parents did?) Really think about what is important about you knowing your child's location, setting expectations around communication, etc. For example, if you find yourself wanting to know their social media account passwords, ask yourself what prompted this. What are your concerns with them interacting online? Is it because you're concerned about harmful situations happening on social media? Rather than taking charge yourself, you could have a conversation with your child so they can develop skills to protect themselves and interact responsibly in virtual spaces.
- **Seek information from various resources and people across different identities** (race, sexual orientation, etc.) in order to ensure you're receiving perspectives from a variety of places.
- **Identify other trustful resources and adults for your child to go to** in case you're unavailable or they need different perspectives.

Key Principles

01

Work on establishing trust

- Be open to communication on both sides if issues arise, and be willing to adjust accordingly as you go and check-in with one another.
- Validate the person you speak to before responding.
- Avoid the use of the word "but" immediately following someone telling you something. Strive instead to use the word "and" wherever possible. For example: "I know you want to start dating BUT you're too young" vs. "I know you want to start dating AND I'll be honest that I'm nervous about that. Let's talk about what dating at your age might look like and what we're both comfortable with." Also watch your use of the words "always" and "never," because these absolutes very rarely fit the situation.

02

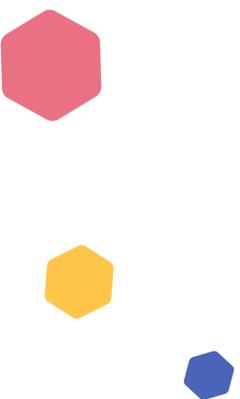
Establish boundaries/expectations

- Come up with a plan together around expectations for locations, communication, etc. Also clarify: what will happen if the boundaries are broken?
- Have an accountability plan for youth and parents' well-being. For example, do youth/parents know who to reach out to if they can't get ahold of each other? Can they agree to check in by a certain time?
- Have an if-then plan. For example: "If we don't hear from you by X time, then I'll check your location/call you/call a back-up contact."
- Expect that there will be some trial and error with figuring out what boundaries and expectations are a good fit for each situation.

03

Recognize that mistakes will happen

- Think about the ultimate goal to stay connected: ask about what happened, and where do you think we should go from here.
- Give youth an opportunity to make mistakes and to work through them before potentially establishing a consequence for a broken expectation.
- Give space between their action and your reaction - take time to reflect on your approach and what you want the ultimate outcome to be. For example, if your child comes home after curfew, try to wait until the next day to have the conversation about expectations unless it's truly urgent.
- Apologize if the situation calls for it. Work on being able to give an apology that works to repair harm.



Having the conversation

Tips for the conversation with your child:

- Think about timing – try to be in both in a good place mentally and physically, with a relaxed place and pace.
- Express love and acceptance to your teen upfront. It's especially important for them to hear this if you are going to discuss things that might seem critical.
- Allow them to have a voice and choice. Ask them what they think is right and why that is, and let them express themselves.
- Communicate your expectations clearly and why you have them. For example, you might say: "My expectation is that you will be home by 11pm if you are driving yourself, since it's not legal in MI for 16-year-olds to drive after 11pm by themselves."
- If you involve teens in setting boundaries/rules, they will be more likely to follow them!

Conversation starters:

- "How can we establish boundaries and build trust?"
- "Can we talk about how we keep in touch with each other as a family?"
- "Do you know who to get ahold of in case of an emergency, or if you can't get ahold of me? Who should I reach out to if I can't get ahold of you and there's an emergency?"
- "How often should we be updating each other on our locations?"

Resources:

- [Understood.org Cell Phone Contract for Older Kids](#)
- [Understood.org Parent-Child Behavior Contract](#)
- [Center for Parent and Teen Communication - Parent and Teen Discipline Contract](#)
 - [Description and guidelines](#)
- [Page 144-157: Guidelines for Respectful Communication and Problem Solving Together](#)
- [Communication worksheet - Striking the Balance section](#)
- [Parent Teen Connect: If-Then Plan Communication](#)
- [Parent and child expectations](#)
- [CDC: Monitoring your teen's activities](#)
- [CDC PDF resource](#)
- [Setting rules with teens](#)
- If you're considering family therapy, you can find a therapist at www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapists
- Books:
 - "Daring Greatly" and "The Gifts of Imperfect Parenting" by Brenne Brown
 - "My Grandmother's Hands" by Resmaa Menakem
- For more info and resources, visit www.moash.org

Keep the conversation going! Situations change. This should be an ongoing process (not a one-and-done conversation). You can always revisit expectations and boundaries.