

# Introduction

Engaging teens in conversation can be challenging, particularly around such complex issues as dating and tending to one's physical and mental health. This also rings true for discussing faith beliefs and practices. It is vital to approach each topic with an openness to a young person's views while also providing gentle guidance and direction. This series of booklets provides a range of ideas for approaching these topics with sensitivity and openness. The booklets' authors provide helpful information about the topic, along with suggestions for conversation starters and activities that are grounded in faith and rooted in loving concern for a young person's well-being and growth. Prayers for and with the teen conclude each section. Parents as well as youth ministers, catechists, teachers, and confirmation sponsors will find these useful in developing a deeper connection with their teen's life and concerns.



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# Talking to teens about Building strong relationships

## **For your information**

When my husband first heard I was working on a book about talking to teens, he gave me a raised eyebrow and a suggestion for the title: “Good Luck With That.” He’s speaking from our shared experience of raising two kids who are now young adults. You may have felt the same way any time you’ve sat down to talk with your teenager. But when your conversation centers on relationships, you might feel like you need more than luck. Suddenly, you’re in “need a miracle” territory. But many parenting experts agree that the secret to these conversations is a simple one: listen and observe. When you talk to your teen about any subject, but especially fraught ones like friends, relationships, and dating, keep those two actions in mind. Borrowing from Scripture (and with deep apologies to the psalmist), be still and know that you have a teenager.

Take some time to think back on the ways you’ve encouraged your child to adopt healthy habits. Whether it’s reading books or eating vegetables, you’ve always set the example. Relationships are no exception. So this is a good time to take stock. Think about the people in your life—do you surround yourself with people who give you what you want for your child? How do you show that you value these good people? How do you deal with unhealthy or toxic relationships? Do you regularly seek out friends, family, and, when needed, professionals who help and support you?

From your own experience, you've also learned that healthy, positive relationships don't just happen but take serious time and nurturing. Ask yourself how you show your child that you do this. Think, too, about the people who were in your orbit during your own teenage years. Who inspired you, cared about you, and made you laugh? Where are they now? What are your thoughts and feelings about them today?

Of course, we want our kids to develop healthy relationships with everyone—family, friends, teachers, bosses, coworkers, coaches, teammates, dating partners, and ultimately, spouse and children. The relationships your child has now can offer life lessons to help with that. So don't be afraid to express what you desire and pray for in your child's relationships. Use the following statements to organize your thoughts. Add anything else that's important to you:

- I want you to have friends who are honest with you, friends you can be comfortable and honest with, without being afraid of being judged or insulted.
  - I want you to have a boyfriend/girlfriend who respects you. I want you to be a respectful boyfriend/girlfriend.
  - I want you to have friends who listen to you. I want you to know how to listen well to others.
  - I want you to have people in your life who: \_\_\_\_\_
- 

We'll get into some specific questions you can ask your child in the pages ahead. For now, take some time to think about your relationships, observe what's going on in your child's life, say a prayer, and listen—not only to your child, but to the Lord speaking to you about all of this.

## **NOTE TO YOUTH LEADERS, CATECHISTS, AND SPONSORS**

It isn't just parents who set an example. Who are the people teens see you interacting with? How do you show what it means to be a friend? If you're a youth leader, you might invite your best friend or significant other to help at a retreat. If you're a confirmation sponsor, try gathering your candidate and family together with you and your spouse or best friend for a special meal to show what it means to grow in faithfulness together.

### **Start a conversation**

Dust off your high school yearbook and go through it with your teenager. Level the playing field a bit by laughing at your Flock of Seagulls hairstyle or powder pink prom dress. Share about the people in your life during those years. "So and so was such a great friend.... Who is like that for you right now?" Sometimes you don't even have to ask. You can say something like, "I remember the moment I realized that so and so wasn't really the person I thought they were...." You might not get a response right away, and that's okay. Just remember to keep listening and observing.

### **Pray**

*Dear God, the days of setting up play dates for my child are long gone. I know I can't control my child's relationships, but I can share what I want for my child, and more important, what you want for both of us. Help me know this by growing in my relationship with you. Be with our family in our conversations as I guide my child to become the amazing person you have created.*

# Talking to teens about Choosing faithful companions

## **For your information**

We might snicker at a generation of teenagers who don't know how to use a rotary phone or address a mailing envelope, but there is one skill practically every teen has today that hasn't changed since ancient times: they can sniff out hypocrisy like a puppy tracking cake crumbs across your kitchen floor. I remember my son grumbling about a Christian youth group that hung out at the fast food place where he worked in high school. No one liked working on nights when these teens gathered because of the mounds of trash they left behind. It made a strong impression on my son, and he began to express impatience with anyone who loudly professed their Christianity, no matter how sincere.

Faithful parents of all beliefs naturally want our children to find companions who can help them uphold that faith. But anything even remotely resembling religious hypocrisy can send up red flags in your teen's mind. And knowing you are a faithful person, your child might be eager to share it with you, as a way to safely question those beliefs with you. Think of this as an opportunity to have some good conversations, and be open to what you can learn from your child as you listen carefully. Some teens might keep all of this to themselves, but it's good to remember that developmentally speaking, faith questioning is a natural milestone in the teen years. (It's also important to note that not all teens experience this.) Some teens might seek out

friends who support and even lead that questioning. Don't pronounce immediate judgments, but rather, observe what's happening. Are any friends threatening your child's safety or long-term happiness? If so, it's time to step in. Otherwise, keep listening, observing, and offering guidance when asked.

Of course, most Catholic parents would be thrilled if our kids found friends who went to Mass with them. But while we can't control who our kids hang out with, we can offer opportunities for them to discover and cultivate faithful friendships. Whether you enroll your child in a Catholic school, parish youth group, or Catholic outreach group such as St. Vincent de Paul, just remember one thing. In a few years, your child will graduate and seek friendships outside of these familiar frameworks. If faith is important to your child, it might be important to find friends who share that, or your child might feel confident enough that it won't matter. Again, it will be up to your child. So provide a framework through your own faithful companions. Do you have friends—real friends, not just other parents you know—at your parish? Can you name any friends whom you'd feel comfortable asking to pray with you? Or simply someone you could ask to pray for you? If the answers are no, what can you do to remedy the situation?

**NOTE TO YOUTH LEADERS, CATECHISTS, AND SPONSORS**

Help kids expand their friendships by developing prayer partners within your program, matching teens to others who might be outside their circles. As a confirmation sponsor, it's important to listen, just as the candidate's parents do. But remember that you were chosen for this role because of your faith. So whenever you speak openly and honestly about faith and what it means to you, or about your struggles or growth, you're giving the candidate some language for faith sharing with friends. That's one of the best confirmation gifts you can offer.

## **Start a conversation**

A natural way to start a conversation about faithful friendships is after you observe some religious practice in your home, whether it's saying a meal blessing together or driving home from Mass. You might say something like, "Are there kids at school who are open about their faith? How do they express it?" Listen to your child's responses and try to understand how your child feels about it. You can simply ask, "What do you think about how they do that?"

## **Pray**

*Jesus, I've always heard about the friends you chose—Peter, Andrew, Matthew; Martha, Mary, Lazarus...and so many more. You hung out with fishermen and tax collectors, saints and sinners. As a parent, I now see your friends through a different lens. What do you want to say to me now about your friends? What do you want to say about my child's friends? Help me listen and respond in love. One more request, Jesus. Help my child find friends who can bring us all closer to you.*