

## **Strong Bonds Fact Sheet:** **Handling the Situation : Building Our Relationship**

When a young person has serious difficulties, stress levels are usually high as family members worry about them and try to help. There is often confusion about how best to handle difficult situations.

There may be frequent conflict or little communication or contact. Family relationships can be very strained or fall apart. Parents may wonder how it got to this and feel helpless to salvage the relationship. Feelings of helplessness and hurt can come out as either anger towards the child, towards other family members, or as self-blame.

You are important to your child. You can rebuild this relationship with time, care and patience. Most young people will come back eventually if they believe the door will be open to them and that they will be respected and listened to.

### **You can only change you**

Even though the focus of the problem may be the young person's behaviour, you can't change what they do. In trying to change your relationship, your only choice is to focus on how you can change what you do. You should talk to your child about their behaviour if you have genuine fears and concerns, but they can only change their behaviour and they need to make that choice themselves, otherwise any changes will only be short-lived.

### **Remember they need you**

Even when you feel completely out of touch with your young person, they still need your support as a back-drop to their lives. Look for ways to let them know you will still be around when they are ready to come back.

If they do want to spend time with you, or talk to you about something, try to be as available as possible. If it has become rare for them to open up to you, you may need to be prepared to drop what you are doing to take advantage of this moment, even if it is not the best time for you.

### **Let go**

Your job as a parent of an adolescent is to slowly let go of control.

Try to treat your child as a separate person with their own feelings, ideas and plans, no matter what their situation. This will be hard if their ideas and plans are very different from what you wanted for them. But it is the only way for them to learn to be more responsible and independent.

### **Listen more, talk less**

It is important to try to listen without reacting or giving advice. Neutral answers can show you are listening and want to understand. It is good to show curiosity about your young person and their ideas and plans.

If they are angry with you, try to listen and accept that it is their point of view, whether or not you think it is justified. Once they know you have heard them out, it will get easier for them to move on from feeling angry.

### **Share ideas without strings**

Imposing solutions on a young person is likely to be met with resistance rather than interest. They are more likely to listen if they come to you for advice, or if you present your thoughts as ideas for them to consider. Your ideas may plant a seed for later. Your listening and respect will help them sort out their own thoughts and reach their own solution.

### **Find things in common**

Finding a common interest can be a great relationship-building tool. Learning more about the Internet, TV shows or music that your son/daughter likes, for example, will give you something positive you can talk about or do together.

Sometimes parents get so stuck on being parents they forget to lighten up. Shared humour and laughter is a great way to connect.

### **Find your sensitive points**

Think about the times that you clash. What are the triggers that make one of you react badly? Can you think of ways to avoid these situations? Perhaps you could change the way you talk to them or how you react.

### Be firm about boundaries

You are working on liking each other more, but that does not mean you have to put up with being used or abused. You may need to set new boundaries that are more achievable. Once they are set, be firm about observing them. Violence is never acceptable.

### Get past your own bad feelings

Negative feelings like resentment, disappointment, anger or guilt may make your young person feel that the disappointments are stacked so high they can never make up for them. They may feel it is easier to stop trying. Say if you cannot cope.

There may be times when you need to look after yourself first. Be honest about your feelings. Tell them if you cannot help with something any more. Encourage them to look to someone else for support, or to cope on their own this time if possible. This is an opportunity for them to take responsibility and be more independent.

### Involve other mentors

If your relationship is strained, other adult mentors can provide a neutral and supportive ear to your young person, and offer some guidance without being in a parenting role. Young people need other adults as role models or advice-givers – people like grandparents, uncles, godparents, teachers, coaches, welfare workers, family friends. It can be anyone your child likes and respects.

Your children may take advice from others more easily than from you.

### Notice little improvements

Relationships are made of many small interactions. Try to notice and enjoy small improvements as they happen. There will still be times when things are difficult between you. Don't be hard on your child or yourself when things don't go so well. Pick up where you left off and try to learn something from the experience. Recognise your own efforts as valuable in themselves.



### Tips from this Help Sheet

- As hard as it seems, you can only change you.
- Even when you feel completely out of touch with your young person, they still need you and your support.
- Your job as a parent of an adolescent is to slowly let go of control.
- It is important to try to listen without reacting or giving advice.
- Imposing solutions on a young person is likely to be met with resistance rather than interest. Make suggestions, or let them come to you.
- Finding a common interest can be a great relationship-building tool.
- Think about the times that you clash. What are the triggers that make one of you react badly, and how can you avoid them?
- Negotiate new boundaries that are more achievable.
- There may be times when you need to look after yourself first. Be honest about your feelings.
- If your relationship is strained, other adult mentors can provide a neutral and supportive ear to your young person.
- Try to notice and enjoy small improvements as they happen.



### Related Help Sheets

- Improving Communication
- Adolescent Development
- Parenting Styles
- Setting Boundaries
- Feeling Blamed



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