

# Teen Communication: Welcome Mats and Do Not Disturb Signs

BY MARIA T. ARANDA, PH.D.

## WITH MY OLDEST DAUGHTER

about to start middle school, I recently attended a series of workshops offered by the Ophelia Project/The Boys Initiative. Even for those well versed in issues of teen self-esteem and communication, the experience served as a welcome reminder of the best ways to keep communication flowing with my sixth grader. After all, like most parents, I'd prefer my child come to me first with her struggles rather than solely relying on her peers.

Communicating with middle and high schoolers, however, can pose some real challenges. While not quite little kids, our tween and teen children are also not quite adults. Gone are the young children who burst into tears, throw their arms around us and pour out their hearts. In their places, we sometimes find increasingly private and stubbornly silent, go-it-alone teens. Yet instead of pulling our hair out in frustration, we can often get communication going again by carefully choosing our own words and actions. One key lies in the way we react to their stubborn privacy. Instead of giving up or throwing up our arms in frustration, we can throw our arms around them, remind them how much we love them and remind them we are their allies and number one fans.

Another key lies in the way we speak to them. Our tone and our words can either promote or undermine communication. Many of our comments can easily fall into two categories: Welcome Mats, which encourage further conversation, or Do Not Disturb Signs, which just produce more silence. Pay attention to the way you speak to your children to see if your words are welcoming more communication or sending the message to take it elsewhere.

Communicating with middle and high school students may be the toughest job around. With practice and patience, however, we can keep our kids talking – and strengthen our families.



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## WELCOME MATS

- What do you think about...?
- That's a good question.
- I don't know, but we can find out.
- I'm curious about what you're thinking about...
- That's pretty insightful.
- Do you know what that means?
- That sounds important to you.
- Do you want to talk about it?
- I had a very similar thing happen to me when I was your age.

## DO NOT DISTURB SIGNS

- You're too young to understand.
- If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it.
- You don't need to know about that.
- Why are you telling me this?
- If you say that again, I'll...
- That's really none of your business.
- I don't care what your friends are doing!
- We'll talk about that when you need to know.
- That's just for girls/boys.
- Just do what I tell you to.

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