

Communication tips for partnerships

What young people learn depends on the support and opportunities they receive as well as their own interests and motivation. As a mentor, you can provide opportunities for youth to communicate in a healthy way. Your Junior Partner can learn skills that will help him or her at home, at school and with friends and may have long-lasting impact on the choices that affect their future.

Below are three sections over aspects of communication which Senior Partners have expressed a need for support: getting to know one another, talking about tough issues and enforcing boundaries.

As the partnership gets to know one another and develops trust, the youth will gain confidence and learn social skills.

How do you incorporate communication into your regular activities?
Whether youth are involved in sports, gardening, photography, or building things, they need to learn good communication skills. As young people share their thoughts, the relationship is strengthened and confidence is built. Whether driving them to sports practice, going out to dinner or watching television, take the time to talk to them and get them talking to you.

Conversation starters:

What is your favorite project or hobby? What do you like about it?

If you could travel to anywhere in the world, where would you go? Why?

What is your favorite book or movie? What do you like about it?

If you had to give up all the electrical appliances in your house, what would you miss the most, and why?

What do you spend most of your time out of school doing?

Tell an interesting or funny story about your day.

Share some funny things you or your friends did as kids.

Interactive activities to promote communication:

Baking cookies or making dinner together: Give your JP choices in what you make, and have him or her read the recipe. This is a great semi-structured opportunity for your Junior Partner to practice “being the leader.”

Building things: Constructing a model car or airplane, building a birdhouse or fixing a bicycle are all great times to teach your JP a new skill as you get to know one another. Observing how your Junior Partner approaches a project will give you insight into his or her personality.

Learn about something new: as kids grow, they go through phases where they are fascinated by one subject. Whether it’s sharks, bugs, dinosaurs or kitties, learning together about something your JP is interested in is a great way to spark conversation. Older youth might be interested in electronics, computers or music, to name a few. They are certainly interested in something!

Communication Activity “Who’s listening?”

Ask youth what type of listener they would like to be.

(Active listeners are the most effective).

Brainstorm some places where youth can listen to conversations

(TV, a school activity, home, a restaurant, etc.)

Ask youth to watch others and see if they can figure out if those involved in conversations are passive, selective, attentive, or active listeners.

Review the types of listening behaviors people exhibit.

Passive listener creates a one-way conversation with little effort to connect to the other person’s message.

Selective listener receives only a partial message; selects messages to match preferred ideas or interests; creates a barrier.

Attentive listener gets most of the intended message intended and is not judgmental about what the speaker has to say.

Active listener receives the speaker’s message; works with care and respect to confirm understanding; gets the facts as well as the feeling.

When the partnership talks about tough issues, your Junior Partner will develop personal beliefs and boundaries.

We can't always expect kids to approach us about the “big issues” that affect them, such as family changes, drugs and alcohol use or unhealthy lifestyle choices. That's why we need to be on the lookout for good opportunities to initiate the discussion ourselves. Research shows that using proactive communication can decrease conflict, increase influence, and produce more successful conversations with youth around these important issues.

Remember to ask good questions, listen to their answers, and always look for common ground. And be sure to keep your words and ideas at a level they can understand. To discover some effective ways to get the conversation started with your Junior Partner, see the age-specific suggestions below.

Ages 6-8

- "What have they taught you in school about the dangers of using drugs or alcohol?"
- If you see someone put out a cigarette or see cigarette butts on the ground, comment on how you feel about that and ask your JP what he or she thinks.

Ages 9-11

- “Why do you think some teenagers smoke even though it is so dangerous?”
- “Why do you think it’s important for us to be active? Riding bikes, playing outside..”

Ages 12-15

- At the mall, point out a group of kids wearing unusual clothing that you think may represent a significant social group and ask: “What do you think when you see kids dressed like that?”
- “What are some good reasons you might give your own child for not smoking cigarettes?”

When you're watching a movie or television show together where a character smokes, wait until after the show and ask, "What did you think about that character who always had a cigarette dangling from their mouth?"

Here are some specific skills mentors can implement when tackling hard topics with teens:

1. **Be absolutely clear with your Junior Partner about the good things you expect from him or her.** Often kids live up to the standard that is set for them, or the expectations they sense others have for them.
2. **Be an involved listener.** Ask questions - and encourage them. Paraphrase what your JP says to you. Ask for input about decisions. Showing your willingness to listen will make him or her feel more comfortable about opening up to you.
3. **Give honest answers.** Don't make up what you don't know; offer to find out answers together.
4. **Use TV reports, relevant commercials, or school discussions** about issues to help you introduce the subject in a natural, unforced way.
5. **Don't react in a way that will cut off further discussion.** If your JP makes statements that challenge or shock you, turn it into a calm discussion of why they think people do that (whatever they're talking about—drugs, unprotected sex, or whatever), and whether the effect is worth the risk.
6. **Role-play with your Junior Partner** and practice ways to say no to negative peer pressure. Acknowledge how tough those situations can be.

You're aiming for a two-way conversation that gives your Junior Partner room to have his or her personal opinion and communicate a different point-of-view. After the partnership time, ask yourself who did most of the talking. If the youth didn't do at least 25 percent of it, you might need to ask more questions—and work to create enough safety to allow your JP to participate fully.

When you as the Senior Partner appropriately enforce your expectations for your JP's behavior, the youth will learn appropriate behaviors and experience healthy consequences.

1. Keep your best motives in mind

When we feel upset, our motives change. Without realizing it, we begin to focus on punishing, being right, or keeping the peace rather than healthy problem solving. Before talking to your Junior Partner about unacceptable behavior, pause for a moment and ask yourself: *What do I really want?* This pause can help you get your motives in check and move from simply "keeping the peace" through silence to being a powerful influence on your JP.

2. Confront with facts, not judgments

When you present the facts, you obligate the child to respond to the information. When you use judgments or accusatory language, kids become defensive and feel no

obligation to respond. Instead of saying “*Why did you do that? I can’t believe you broke that bottle in the street!*” try “*I saw you throw that bottle. Now it’s broken in the street and if a car drives by they could get a flat tire. We need to pick it up.*” Then follow through and require the child to be part of cleaning up the mess or fixing the problem.

3. Make it safe

Create safety even when there are no problems. Communicating respect, praising small positive signs, "catching" them when they're being good, and showing an interest in your Junior Partner's life will help him or her feel much safer talking to you when problems emerge.

Teens may become defensive during your crucial conversations *less* because of what you're saying than because of *why they think* you're saying it. Here are some steps to help them feel safe in the conversation:

State what you *don't* intend and what you *do* intend: "*I want to reassure you that I have no desire to make your decisions for you, or to cut you off from having a happy life. I want to be supportive of you, and I want to influence choices you might make that I believe will hurt you.*"

4. Discuss, agree on and enforce boundaries

If you talk about your rules and expectations for your JP's behavior *before* he or she is tempted to make bad choices, it is much easier to enforce them later. Then when boundaries are violated, hold the child accountable consistently. If it's a boundary, it should *always* be a boundary.

Information and ideas adapted from: www.keepingkidsfromsmoking.com, The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign's Behavior Change Expert Panel