



Parent Worksheet 3

Building Positive Family Relationships

This worksheet is one of a series aimed at supporting caregivers to parent their teenagers. The 4 worksheets include: 1) Youth Development, 2) Boundaries, 3) Positive Family Relationships and; 4) Communication.

When under stress family life can quickly become dominated by negative interactions, arguments and other conflict. Nurturing and supporting each other often take a back seat as family life stops being fun. To enjoy closer family relationships and to parent more effectively, families need to spend quality time together.

Quality Time

It's really easy as a parent to get caught up in work issues, money issues and everything else that parents have to deal with on a daily basis. Sometimes we can forget to spend quality time with your teenager and have meaningful conversations. A great way of spending time with your teenagers is being involved in something your teenager is involved in. This could be as simple as watching their sports game. It will provide you with a topic to talk about as well as showing that you care.

One simple way to have quality family time is to eat together regularly. Research shows that teenagers who eat together with their families at least 5 times a week are; more likely to do better at school, less likely to abuse alcohol or other drugs, feel better about themselves and feel more connected to their parents and family.

Meal times provide a great chance to connect as a family. It's your chance as a parent to talk with your kids and to discuss their day - the highs and lows, their plans and goals.

Make time for positive family activities

Getting your family to participate in positive activities together can be a good way to have quality time and change family dynamics which may have become negative and ingrained. Young people usually do want their parent's time and attention, however it is unlikely they will say this and when shared family activities are suggested they may even appear reluctant and sullen initially. Sometimes you will need to go ahead and try and plan activities anyway, even if your young people aren't overly enthusiastic.

Dos and don'ts of meal times

Do's:

- Make sharing the priority. Being together is more important than the actual meal
- Let everyone know when they need to be home for the meal
- Start small. Get used to eating one or two times a week first; that may be enough
- Get everyone involved with the meal in some way be it shopping, finding a recipe, cooking, serving the food, setting or clearing the table
- Turn off the TV, iPods and cell phones. There's no point being together if no one connects
- Talk about your day. Ask the kids about school, their friends and their weekend plans

Don'ts:

- Don't get caught up worrying about table manners if it distracts from being together
- Don't allow family members to criticise each other. Keep things light and fun
- Avoid growling at kids or correcting them when they share things during meals

A family that has got 'out of the habit' of spending time together will need practice to get used to doing this again. Parents will need to show some leadership in getting things started and persist with it. A teenager is unlikely to invest their time and energy into something which they see as a one-off.

It's a good idea to start small. It doesn't need to be elaborate or cost a lot of money. The important thing is sharing and enjoying your time together. Remember, families that don't spend time together find it harder to communicate with each other.

Ideas for family activities include:

- Watching a movie together
- Going out for a meal
- Baking or cooking
- Fishing or boating
- A trip to the beach
- Gardening
- Fixing the car
- Going for a walk
- Go to the pool
- Take a picnic somewhere
- Shoot netball hoops
- Kick a rugby ball
- Have a hit of tennis
- Throw a frisbee
- Play a game – monopoly, charades, cards
- Go camping
- Plan a holiday

Keep things simple initially and don't be too ambitious. If the family isn't getting on, locking them into an activity which could escalate conflict (i.e. a weekend camping trip) is not advisable.

It is also important to be flexible. Prepare for the fact that the family activity may not go as planned. Having an expectation that things will go really well from the outset is unrealistic (as they probably won't at first).

It is reasonable, however, to expect that over time, shared family activities will become more successful and memorable for the whole family.

Remember that young people will be on the alert for parents who don't follow through with their promises. Schedule family activities and make them a priority that you stick to.

Being deliberate about family time shows your kids the value you place on them and their part in the family.

Chris, age 14, was rude and abusive towards his parents. He ruled the house, had everything he wanted and lots of freedom. His parents were both very busy and let him behave like this because they felt guilty and hoped it might buy them some goodwill. Unsurprisingly his behaviour got worse. Eventually the family sought help to put in place boundaries for Chris and make him take responsibility for his behaviour. They cut his allowance and made clear consequences for rude or abusive behaviour. As well as putting in place rules both Mum and Dad contracted to spend at least 30 minutes three times a week doing something with Chris, either together or separately. They also planned family outings. Relationships improved, as did Chris's behaviour, despite having less money and freedom.

Reflective Questions

Think about the communication you have with your teenager:

1. How close do you feel to them? Do you think your teenager feels a similar way?
2. Are there things you could do to bring you closer together? Perhaps something small and easy like eating together?
3. Can you remember some enjoyable times together with your son/daughter within the last year? Perhaps they enjoyed their time with you just as much?
4. Are there things you include into your weekly routine as a family as a way to rebuild these relationships?
5. Does everything you do as a family have a purpose? How about doing something that is simply about being together?