



# Communication is Key

Raising a teen or preteen (tween) is extremely challenging these days. As a mother of a middle schooler, I am familiar with the joys, pitfalls, and upsets of parenting. At one point or another, you have probably found yourself to be frustrated, worried, drained or confused about how to handle situations that arise in school and at home. You may even say things to yourself like “How will I survive? Will we ever get along? They have changed. I don’t know who they are anymore.” If this all sounds familiar, please know that you are not alone. Being a parent or guardian did not come with an instruction manual and unfortunately, a great deal of parenting is trial and error.

In my role as a pediatrician I have the opportunity to care for and counsel hundreds of families, which gives me a unique insight into parenting that I will share with you in this and continuing columns in *The Positive Community*. To start, one of the most important things I have discovered over the years is that communication is essential to nurturing and fostering healthy parent/child relationships.

I know. You’re asking, “How can I communicate with someone who doesn’t like to talk and answers me in one or two word sentences?” Given the advent of e-mail, instant messaging, and text messaging, young people are learning to communicate in brief sound bites rather than express their thoughts and feelings in any kind of detail.

We have a generation of young people who are much more mature and a lot less sheltered than previous generations. The fast paced nature of technology can be advantageous, allowing them to expand their relationships and knowledge base almost instantaneously. But, it’s also a disadvantage because it exposes them to information and vices they would not ordinarily be exposed to at such a young age.

As adults who did not grow up in the information age, many of us tend to avoid learning how to use the new technology. We don’t like to change our way of doing things, and it might be difficult and frustrating to learn. Maybe we don’t believe we can trust the privacy and safety of these new advances. One thing is for certain, however. Our children are growing up with the technology and several methods of communication, social networking it’s called—My Space, Facebook, Twitter, smart phones, texting, digital photos—and they use them every day. These forms of communication are not going away and the longer we ignore

them, the wider the communication gap becomes between the generations. It is imperative that we learn how to use all forms of social media so that we can communicate effectively with our children and understand the new world in which they are growing up.

Talking face to face is still an indispensable way to communicate, but it’s often difficult to get preteens and teens to talk in depth about what’s going on in their lives. Often they think their parents don’t care, won’t listen, or will just give them a lecture that they don’t want to hear... and guess what. They are absolutely right! As adults, we think that we have more experience and want to save our children from heartache by telling them what to do. Why should we bother to listen, when we have the right answer and know exactly how to fix the situation? Right? Well, not exactly.

In order to find out what makes young people tick, we have to be interested in what they have to say. We may not want to hear everything they have to say, but interrupting, editing, or reacting to what they are sharing will guarantee that they won’t hear what we have to say and the opportunity to communicate effectively will be lost. They have to know that we are listening and that what they have to say matters. We don’t have to agree, but we have to be available to have an honest and open dialogue with them.

Communication is key to unleashing their greatness and having them live healthy, productive lives. ■

## About Dr. Liz

*Dr. Elizabeth Robinson Henry (Dr. Liz) has dedicated her life to providing youth with the knowledge and confidence to lead healthy and productive lives. She is the founder of Dr. Liz Consulting, a practice focused on making a difference in the lives of adolescents by addressing their physical, emotional, and mental needs. Teens, tweens and their parents can find resources on how to build self-confidence, manage anger and stress, and overcome issues such as bullying, emotions, fitting-in, and obesity at [www.drlizforyouth.com](http://www.drlizforyouth.com).*

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