emoGlow · Scripts

Before a talk you're dreading · Ages 13–17

What to say before a talk you're dreading with your teenager

"Every time I try to talk to my fourteen-year-old I get "Fine." and a shut door. How do I start the talk I keep putting off?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"What happened? Who was it? Why won't you EVER talk to me?"

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Hey. Hot chocolate's out here."

A talk you have been putting off can come out all at once: what happened, who was it, why won't you talk to me. At a closed door, that can sound less like care and more like a demand.

What is known, and at what age

In a study that followed 982 young people over three waves, young people whose parents reacted negatively when they told them things went on to feel more controlled and less connected, and later kept more secrets and told less. Those whose parents reacted positively felt more connected, and later told more. It is a study of links over time, not proof that one reaction causes the next.

A review of 32 studies of ten- to eighteen-year-olds found that what parents know about their teen's life is linked to what the teen chooses to tell them, and that, of the things parents do, warmth had the most lasting link to what parents know. Another study, of three age groups followed for three years, found that, by parents' reports, children told them less as they got older.

What the words do

Take 1 is three questions and an "ever" in one breath. Take 2 is what is left once the opener has been said out loud first and heard: no questions, nothing asked of your teen, and an easy reason to come out of the room.

No study we know of has tested saying a line out loud before a talk. It is a practical step, not a finding. The part the research does speak to is your reaction, and that is the part you can think through before you knock.

Tonight, before the talk, say your first line out loud once. Ask yourself: would I keep talking if someone said this to me? Then knock, say it, and leave the door open. If your teen does start to tell you something, keep your first reaction calm and warm.

If you are worried about your teen's safety, or need someone to talk to yourself: in the US, call or text 988, any time; in the UK and Ireland, Samaritans, 116 123; elsewhere, findahelpline.com.

If you live in two homes

Your teen may tell one home more than the other, and that is not a contest. Plan your own first line and your own reaction in your home. Never ask your teen to report on the other home or to carry a message between you; pediatricians' guidance on separation says not to make a child the messenger.

In the UK

Your GP or school nurse can talk through anything that worries you. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.