

Our Role in Being Pro-Development

Tips on how youth-serving professionals, parents, and caregivers can use strength-based communication to engage and empower teens from *Reaching Teens*.

What is our role in supporting youth as they seek to answer these questions?

Offer unconditional regard. This is easily the most important “should.” It is even a must. Stand in young people’s shoes for a moment and relate to how they feel. Experience the excitement for a moment. Now temper that thrilling feeling with the anxiety and confusion that a process as all-encompassing as identity formation generates. Experience the pushes and pulls of friendships that come and go, that feel full of judgment. How do you feel? Unsettled? Insecure?

Caring adults are the antidote to those unsettled, insecure, foreboding feelings. Their love is the bedrock of young people’s security, now and far into the future. Parents’ and caregivers’ steadfast presence is the most guaranteed thing in their lives, even when teens pretend (to themselves) that they no longer need it. When parents fill their role, we professionals are additive. When, for one reason or another, they are unable to, we are critical. “Who am I?” they ask. “You are you,” we answer with our unwavering presence. “And we couldn’t imagine wishing you were anyone different.”

Create an environment where all young people feel normal and fit in. This means working with all young people to have zero tolerance for anything less than acceptance. Acceptance is different from tolerance; it is a higher goal. All are accepted as they come. This place is safe and welcoming for all. For people with more difficulty finding peers, we must work harder to connect them with youth who may share common interests or experiences.

Model being reflective. No big decisions should be handled quickly. Thoughtfulness always works. But thoughtfulness is a luxury many people don’t believe they have, especially young people operating at a quick pace. The more we demonstrate that our best decisions come when we think them through, as well as engage others, the more young people will see

that it is OK, even important, to consider options and weigh alternatives before drawing conclusions.

Model being a “slow learner.” The frantic pace with which young people try to get to the “Who am I?” question is not always good for them. Especially if they impose a lot of pressure on themselves by thinking they need the answer by the time they are 18 years old - that arbitrarily constructed definition of adulthood. It is good for them to know that figuring out who we are is a lifelong process. We have opportunities for self-improvement, even reinvention, throughout our lives. We all make mistakes; over time, we learn that the measure of our character is how we make amends and grow from our experiences. Anything we do that demonstrates second chances diminishes pressure. When we savor the present, we teach them to look toward the future but live in the now.

Model what a healthy adult looks like. It is hard to imagine oneself as an adult during the teen years. It really helps when teens have a role model of somebody who lives a life they could imagine. It is on us to model the responsible adults we hope they will measure themselves against.

Model that adulthood can be fun. We don’t want teens to think they must be in a rush to live now because the future consists only of self-sacrifice and hard work. It is a strategic act of role modeling when we demonstrate that adulthood is something to look forward to.

Model spontaneity. Model lifelong learning. It is important youth do not think that their only opportunity to experiment and test boundaries is while they are young. Let them see how we continue to enjoy new adventures, even those we haven’t planned. Next, show by example that lessons are everywhere as long as we remain open to seeing them.

Create boundaries. Adolescence must include risks. Experimentation is a critical ingredient of figuring out one’s place in the world. If we outlaw risk-taking, we stifle development. It won’t work anyway;

the drive to experiment is ingrained in adolescence. Instead, we create safe boundaries beyond which they cannot stray. Then, we let them push against those boundaries and experiment (all within safe territory we have marked off).

See the 35-year-old. Define success wisely. Adolescence is hard enough without youth thinking they have made it, or not, by 18 years of age. Understand we are guiding youth to be successful 35-, 40-, and 50-year-olds. This takes pressure off today and helps teens see their own strengths and imagine how to best fit into the world.

Be a sounding board. The question “Who am I?” can be answered only by the person asking the question. When we impose answers, the message we convey is “I don’t think you can handle this yourself.” We undermine the very confidence needed to build the competencies the young person seeks. Listen. Be a sounding board. Offer guidance and shape solutions when asked.

Know when to get out of the way. Think of the fundamental question “Who am I?” as a huge jigsaw puzzle. We help youth create the edges first by offering them clear boundaries. We show them the design they are to complete by being “the picture on the box” as we role model being healthy adults. We wisely get out of the way as they work the irregular inner pieces on their own.

With that said, when do we jump in? We jump in when they stray beyond the edges into territory that challenges safety or morality. When they were small, we let them learn that a spilled bucket took effort to clean up. But we never let them run into the street or place their hands onto the stove. So, too, during adolescence, we will let them make mistakes but none that cause irreparable harm.

We can create a world full of adults who grasp the importance of respecting the work adolescents have to do on their own, while we remain committed to shaping their lives.