

Helping Teens Be Heard

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In celebration of Mental Health Month, Dr. Vannucci writes about how positive discipline principles can help improve parent-teen communication and promote mental health.

May is Mental Health Month, and **Mental Health America's** theme this year is "**Mind Your Health**". While many of us can improve our habits for coping with stress, youth in particular often lack knowledge about or access to resources to help them cope. A key resource for many teens is family; yet some struggle to communicate their need for support from family members.

The theme of MHANS' **teen essay and poster contest** this year was "*If my parents only knew...*", and participants wrote about challenges in communicating with family members about issues they face at school, with friends, and even within the family. Some teens expressed that they struggle to balance expressing their own needs versus supporting the needs of other family members, especially when the family faces a crisis that impacts everyone. Others said that they fear being judged or punished and so avoid direct communication, and some expressed disappointment that subtle communication goes unnoticed.

While teens have the skills and expressive abilities to communicate with family members, teachers, mentors, and others about their struggles, often teens do not ask for help. It is important for parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults in relationships with youth to consciously create an environment of sharing and communication. We must offer our youth an invitation, without expecting an immediate RSVP.

Positive Discipline (PD) is one model for developing an environment for sharing in the family. Despite the name, PD is not about discipline in the sense of punishment or correction; alternately, it also does not promote permissive parenting. Rather it focuses on promoting **emotional intelligence**, or EQ, the social and emotional life skills needed to cope effectively through communication and healthy boundaries.

A key focus of the PD model is understanding the purpose of behavior. Behavior is communication, and our youth may be telling us through actions that they need to feel more empowered, encouraged, noticed, or included. **Family meetings** provide one vehicle for communication. Family meetings can be held weekly or monthly and include all household members for the purpose of support and group problem-solving. Rather than simply complaining or arguing, household members put their heads together to resolve grievances or issues each member faces within and outside of the family. Issues can range from who is supposed to do the dishes to coping with danger in the community.

Ultimately, the aims of the family meeting are to model positive coping, provide support, and help youth develop a toolbox for coping both with common and exceptional stressors. When stressors exceed our abilities, sometimes outside help is needed. Improved communication with teens helps us to know when we need support to help them.

Helpful Links:

Positive Discipline:

<http://www.positivediscipline.com/>

Mental Health America "Mind Your Health":

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/may>

National Institute of Mental Health:

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/index.shtml>

Teen Mental Health:

<http://teenmentalhealth.org/>