

Communicating with Students

Grades 9-12 Resource Guide



How to use this guide:

The **Communicating with Students Resource Guide** is a tool for educators. This guide will help to improve communication with students, grades 9-12.

In this guide, you will find specific questions about communication, answered by a variety of our Boys Town experts; from the Boys Town Center for Behavioral HealthSM to the Boys Town Common Sense Parenting[®] program and many who serve the Boys Town National Hotline[®].



Building relationships with students can be difficult. Especially if your students have experienced trauma in their home environments. However, as educators it is important to make those connections, and make an effort to communicate effectively. This guide offers tips and tricks to make communicate easy and effective.

Note: Resource Guides are also available for grades K-3 and 4-8.

For more information, visit boystowntraining.org



Communicating with Students

Getting Students to Open Up

Rather than “good” or “fine,” how do you get students to open up about their school day?

Start this conversation at the beginning of the school year so communication is commonplace and expected. Just as the more you get to know a friend or co-worker, it's easier to talk with your students if you are in the habit of conversing with each other.

Ask open-ended questions. If you ask a yes or no question, you are likely to get a grunt or if you are lucky, a simple “Yes” or “No” answer back. Get creative in your questions and have fun with it. Some examples of open-ended questions are:

- *What is the coolest thing you learned today?*
- *Tell me what the latest scoop is on campus.*

Model good communication skills by opening up about your day. Share something funny, bring up an interesting piece of current news or connect with your teen on a common interest. If you know little or nothing about the sports team or club your students participates in, educate yourself, ask questions about it and get excited with your class. Kids might start offering unsolicited conversations if you make this a habit.

Finally, timing is everything. A barrage of questions first thing in the morning or in the middle of social hour will likely be met with annoyance.

Laura K, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor



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Signs my Students are Having a Bad Day

What signs stand out to teachers in the classroom when students are having a bad day?

Multiple absences

Tardy

Tired (head on desk, yawning)

Facial expressions (angry, sad)

Crying/emotional

Poor hygiene and/or grooming

Wearing same clothes

Not prepared for class

Don't participate or unusually quiet

Lack of focus

Plummeting grades

On phone/headphones in

Negative verbal comments

Behavior changes (acting out, out of sorts, abnormal behavior)

Outbursts

Aggressive behavior

Asking to leave class

Isolating from others

Disengaging

Suspicion of substance abuse

Risky behaviors

Somatic complaints

Julie B, Boys Town National Hotline Supervisor



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Stress and Anxiety

What tips would you give to teachers to recognize stress and anxiety in their students?

When teachers accept the responsibility of preparing students for their futures, they truly fulfill a position that encompasses far more than developing knowledge in subject matter. Many students today are faced with issues far beyond the classroom and academic pressures that can cause them great stress and anxiety. Some tell-tale signs a teen might be struggling can include:

- A student begins isolating. For example, instead of sitting and interacting with others as usual, a student might withdraw, become quiet and seem distracted.
- A student begins turning in assignments late or not at all when in the past they been well done and handed in on time.
- A student feels the need to take frequent breaks. It may almost seem they are escaping the structure of the classroom or are physically ill.
- A student's body language – e.g., reluctance to give eye-contact or a posture that appears tired and weak.
- Sometimes self-care and hygiene are neglected.
- Emotions are very near the surface as evidenced by crying easily, angering quickly and over-reacting to situations.

Catching signs of distress as early as possible is a key to helping teens get back on the right path.

Pat T, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor



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Building Relationships and Trust

It is important for every child to have an adult to talk with. When it comes to building relationships and forming trust between a teen and an adult, what tips do you have to cultivate that relationship?

A teen needs someone to listen and show genuine concern. It is easy to get in the role of instructing, redirecting, teaching and coaching. Slow down and listen. As your child gets older, they will want to bounce ideas off of you, ask questions or vent about something. Engage in active listening by dropping everything to talk, giving eye contact and nodding your head. You might need to provide empathy, prompt with questions to help your teen practice problem solving or even share how a decision you made in the past affected a situation.

Be honest and be yourself. A key element in any healthy relationship is honesty. Do not try to be someone you are not just to connect with a teen. You can be different but still connect. Share something about yourself. Give the youth honest answers even if it's not what they want to hear.

Be consistent. If you allow your class to be extremely loud one day but then lecture or remove privileges from teens for that same behavior the next day, they will not know what to expect from you. Consistency makes how you relate with teens more predictable which makes them feel more secure with you.

Guide without judgment. Questions like "What can you do next time so that does not happen again?" or "How do you think you will handle this next week?" instead of "Why did you do such a dumb thing?" allow teens to think through how they need to act next time. Part of being a teenager is making mistakes. Guide, but also love kids through all of it. You can do this by teaching and helping with problem solving skills. A teen does not have the life experience or fully developed brain yet that's helpful in making good judgments.

Laura K, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor



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Getting a Struggling Student to Talk

Do you have any tips for teachers with concerns about certain students who may be struggling with talking about what's going on?

1. Set expectations for students regarding communication. Teach them to take responsibility to communicate circumstances affecting performance, mood and behavior.
2. Encourage a variety of means to communicate within what is allowed by the school – email, text, twitter, in person or voice mail.
3. Check with other teachers, coaches, aides, etc. to give all a heads up and enlist a team approach.
4. Involve parents, counselors and any other administrative staff right away.
5. Don't develop exclusivity with students as you may be in over your head and you will not always be available in their time of need.
6. Build an action plan with the team and discuss it with the student.
7. Keep parents informed (e.g., school card, emails, text, etc.).
8. Even if it seems that the situation has been resolved, continue to check back with the student at scheduled intervals and randomly as well.
9. Design lesson plans and develop learning experiences that draw students into the group.
10. Praise approximations. Empathize.

Linda M, Boys Town National Hotline Supervisor



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Behavioral Issues

Do you have any suggestions for developing and building relationships with kids who already have behavioral issues, or issues keeping them from communicating?

1. Show interest in the whole person rather than just as a classroom student.
2. Develop rapport through social conversation – e.g., ask open-ended questions, show interest in small bits of personal student information and reward efforts immediately.
3. Seek out opportunities to connect with student outside the classroom – e.g., say “hello” in the lunch room, in the hallway between classes and before or after school.
4. Adjust expectations with the goal of improvement versus mastery.
5. Praise approximations.
6. Provide an ongoing overview of expectations and feedback on progress.
7. Maintain high ratios of positive-to-negative interactions.
8. Whenever possible, draw others into communication with the student.
9. Utilize various means to communicate – e.g., written notes, high fives, smiles and nods in addition to verbal exchanges.
10. Encourage students to stop by anytime for any reason to talk.

Linda M, Boys Town National Hotline Supervisor



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Addressing Trauma

What tips can I offer to students to address things like loss, stress, and difficult emotions?

Kids today seem less prepared to deal with tough issues that inevitably pop up in the course of life. And talking about them isn't the easiest or most natural thing for teens to do – especially in today's electronic world where texting, chatting, emailing or some other electronic means of communicating is much more popular and prevalent.

Talking face to face, voice to voice and heart to heart with a trusted adult (parent, grandparent, family friend, school staff, etc.) is still by far one of the best ways to address difficult issues and emotions. Kids might be more willing to talk to adults about these things if they know how to approach and start the conversation.

A good way to help kids learn how to do this is to choose a time when distractions are minimal. Talk to them about the words to use to ask adults for help – e.g., “When you were my age, did you ever have to deal with... (loss, stress, difficult emotions/situations, etc.)? How did you handle it?” Teaching kids how to ask the right questions can help them become more comfortable and willing to begin asking for help when they are struggling.

Pat T, Boys Town National Hotline Crisis Counselor



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Contact us!

Tel: (800) 545-5771

Web: boystowntraining.org

Email: training.boystown.org



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