

Working with Teens: A Collaborative Approach

Purpose: This handout helps staff communicate with teens in ways that build trust, reduce power struggles, and encourage responsibility—while still maintaining clear expectations and boundaries.

Why Collaboration Matters

Teens are developing independence, identity, and decision-making skills. They respond best to adults who: - Treat them with respect - Explain expectations clearly - Invite them into problem-solving

An authority-only approach often leads to resistance or shutdown. A collaborative approach leads to cooperation, trust, and safer environments.

What Collaborative Communication Looks Like

1. Lead With Respect

Speak to teens the way you would want to be spoken to. - Use a calm, normal tone - Avoid lecturing or talking down - When possible, get on their level physically

Instead of: > “You need to stop that right now.”

Try: > “Let’s pause for a second and talk about what’s going on.”

2. Explain the “Why”

Teens are more likely to follow expectations when they understand the reason behind them.

Instead of: > “That’s not allowed.”

Try: > “We have this rule because it helps keep everyone safe.”

3. Invite Their Input

Being collaborative doesn’t mean giving up authority—it means involving teens in solutions.

Try asking: - “What do you think would help fix this?” - “How can we make this work for everyone?” - “Help me understand what was going on.”

Listen fully before responding.

4. Offer Choices When Possible

Choices give teens a sense of control while still meeting expectations.

Instead of: > “Go inside. Now.”

Try: > “You can head inside now, or take two minutes to wrap up—your choice.”

(Both options meet the expectation.)

5. Address Behavior, Not Character

Focus on actions and impact, not labels.

Instead of: > “You’re being disrespectful.”

Try: > “When you walked away during our conversation, it made it harder to solve the problem together.”

6. Stay Calm, Even When Teens Aren’t

Your calm response models emotional regulation. - Take a breath before responding - Avoid matching sarcasm or volume - It’s okay to pause and return to the conversation later

Remember

Being collaborative does **not** mean being permissive.

It means: - Clear expectations - Consistent boundaries - Respectful communication

When teens feel heard and respected, they are more likely to: - Follow rules - Ask for help - Be honest - Trust staff

That trust creates a safer, more positive environment for everyone.

Key Takeaway: > Teens don't need adults who control them—they need adults who guide them, listen to them, and work with them.