



Secrets to Success

Talking to Your Teenager

By Emily Stimpson Chapman

Stonehenge. Crop circles. The inner-life of your teenager. These are numbered among the great mysteries of the universe. But at least one doesn't have to remain a mystery.

Recently, *Franciscan Magazine* spoke with Alicia (Doman '94) Hernon, mother to 10 children, ages 22 to 5, and co-host (with her husband and Franciscan's vice president of Strategic Relations, Michael '94) of the popular podcast "Messy Parenting" (messyparenting.org). We asked how she successfully manages to keep the lines of communication open with her offspring once they enter the teen years. Here's what we learned.

1. Take an afternoon nap.

This advice Hernon received from her friend Kimberly Hahn years ago. And a decade of parenting teens has confirmed its wisdom.

"Nighttime is when they want to talk," Hernon says. "As soon as the little ones go to bed, the teens start appearing. They'll want to watch television, play a game, or just chat. It's important for parents to be ready for that."

2. Don't lecture. Listen.

When your teenager initiates a conversation, Hernon says to resist the temptation to use that conversation as a teaching time. Instead, ask questions.

"Really seek to understand them," she says, "even if they're saying things you disagree with. Everyone wants to be understood and known. If your teenagers are taking time to reveal

themselves, don't stifle it with lecturing."

3. Create an environment where they want to talk.

Years ago, Hernon asked her aunt (a mother of seven grown children, mostly girls) her secret to keeping lines of communication open. The aunt's response?

"I do two things well: I shop, and I eat." Hernon now does the same with her own girls.

"It's true," she says. "Girls like to shop and eat. Doing those things with them loosens them up."

When it comes to boys, however, Hernon recommends hitting a trail instead of a mall.

"They want to be moving," she says. "When they're active is when they're most likely to talk. Even if they stay quiet, that's OK. Sometimes it's good to just be present to them. They need to know you want to be with them."

4. Ask their opinion.

Teenagers are known for their strong opinions. Parents should make that work in their favor, says Hernon.

She explains, "Find their button. Find something they're passionate about—politics, sports, popular culture—and ask them about it. Doing that is a way of honoring them and showing respect. It's also a good way to shape them intellectually and work on critical thinking. When you do this, however, it's important to remember that not everything is a moral issue. There are lots of things we can disagree on, and that's OK."

5. Be vulnerable.

The teen years are a time of transition. Parenting teens well, Hernon says, requires acknowledging that transition and preparing both your teens and yourself for the time when they no

longer call your home their home. One way she recommends doing this is to start sharing more with them.

"That may seem weird to parents who are parenting 10- or 12-year-olds," she acknowledges. "But at age 14, 16, 18, they're in a time of transition, and your relationship with them needs to change. Lots of parents get tripped up when they treat their 18-year-old the same as their 14-year-old, or their 16-year-old the same as their 12-year-old. Don't dump on them. Don't lean on them emotionally. But you can let them know you're having a hard day or have a problem with work. If you want your teenager to be vulnerable with you, take that first step and model it in an appropriate way." ■

