

In our efforts to identify with adolescents, we actually alienate them by trying too hard to relate and be hip. Teens think of themselves as mature people. They are test-driving their own theories on what it means to be a grown-up. As a result, they want adults to act like adults. When you try too hard to get “on their level,” they often feel like you’re mocking them. We have to be the adult.

As a natural and necessary part of their development, adolescents experience:

- a need for autonomy
- a desire for privacy
- a greater investment in their peers
- a need to try on different identities
- huge physiological changes

It’s helpful to understand these tendencies, but also to connect with teenagers as the individuals they are and want to be.

Here are some approaches to consider when working with adolescents, especially in a teen drug treatment setting.

1. Don’t speak in teen jargon.

Hip, cool, crunk, sick, ace, fly, phat, tight. By the time you discover these words, they are already out of fashion. And if you come across one in UrbanDictionary.com that is timely, you might freak a teen out a little. Yes, it’s tempting to use teen words ironically for humorous effect. But if you get more eye rolls than normal, stick to the words you know. It may be funny only to you.

2. Be honest.

Adolescents crave authenticity, even while they try on personas like a new outfit. They are looking for authenticity in others, even while they struggle with being authentic. They don’t want a therapist or counselor to sound like a therapist or counselor—or at least how they envision a therapist from movies and television. They want a human being. It means not trying to sugarcoat the situation or hide behind the technical language of the profession. Even if everything around them feels fake, you will be their exception.

3. Be careful about contact.

If you’ve spent any time at a high school, you’ve noticed that teenagers love to hug, wrestle, high five, shoulder punch and

basically find any excuse for physical contact. This contact is mostly peer-to-peer. Physical contact can also confuse teenagers. Keep in mind that a hug from an adult can be easily misinterpreted. High fives and side hugs may be best if physical affirmation is needed.

4. Don’t try to over-identify by offering your own teenage experience.

Someday they’ll realize that teenagers haven’t changed much in the past few generations, but that day is not today. When they rattle off the cliché “you don’t know what it’s like,” you’ll have to give them the benefit of the doubt. You may not know what it’s like, not anymore. If you begin your sentence with, “When I was a teenager,” they are already suspicious of what will come next.

5. Don’t tell them these years are the best years.

First, you’re lying. Second, that is certainly not their experience. Instead, get to the heart of this fallacy. Why do we think these years should be great? What hope can this offer? Few things are more depressing than someone telling you what your reaction should be. If they have been under the illusion that being a teenager is supposed to be great, it might be better to remind them that there are no “best years.” Every stage of life has its unique challenges.

6. Let teens have their “gold star.”

Teenagers can be quirky and obsessive about the strangest things: a particular bracelet they never take off, an odd fashion choice, an afternoon routine, an inexplicable mannerism or peccadillo. I imagine this as a gold star they wear with pride. When working with teenagers, you have to let them have their gold star. If they will only sit on the floor while talking to you, let them sit on the floor.

7. Help them think for themselves.

Teenagers hate being lectured with solutions. Try to help them think for themselves. You can do this by discussing the possible implications of a choice, helping them think critically about what they experience, and inviting them to consider multiple responses. Compiling a pros and cons list is one useful activity for self-reflection.

8. Avoid asking questions they won’t answer.

Teenagers may already be on guard in a therapy session. They are anticipating confrontational questions, because this is how they have interacted with parents and teachers. You may learn more by asking open questions. Questions such as, “How are you?” or “How has your day been?” will help the teenager talk about how he/she feels. A few surprising, safe questions (“What’s your favorite cereal?”) may get them to share in unexpected ways.

9. Listen.

If it feels like the statement “you need to listen” goes without saying, why do we need to keep saying it? Let’s be honest. It’s hard to listen to teenagers. Their logic is all over the place. Their feelings are often so misplaced. They are simultaneously obsessive and apathetic. But if you let them talk, you might be surprised by what they reveal and what you can learn.

10. Compliment the shoelaces.

A lot is going on in a teenager’s head at any moment, including a heaping load of insecurity. It will be a big help if you can remain positive. A little praise goes a long, long way. If it appears like everything in their life is falling apart and they make one bad decision after another, look down at their feet and compliment their shoelaces. Find something, anything that shows you don’t completely disapprove of them. From there, you can work on everything else.

Being an adolescent is not easy. If it were, they would be less anxious to grow up and move on with their life. You are where they want to be. You’re an adult. You can be a guide, someone who has ventured ahead of them to let them know it’s going to be all right. They are stronger than they think they are, more capable, and more caring, and better years are still ahead. ■

Johnny Patout is CEO of New Beginnings Adolescent Recovery Center in Opelousas, La., and is a licensed clinical social worker with nearly 30 years of experience in the addiction treatment field. He is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict with more than 30 years of sobriety.