

Becoming Your Teen's Role Model

What is a role model?

When we say someone serves as a role model, we mean the individual is someone others admire or try to emulate. For teenagers this often means the person is someone they want to be like — whether it's because of the person's lifestyle, athletic prowess or the attitudes the person shows.

Some of those role models are celebrities out of your teen's reach (athletes and movie stars), while others are in his or her own circle of influence (youth ministers, teachers and other parents). What do those people have that make them attractive to your teen?

What teens crave

Why do teens look up to the other adults in their lives? Whether or not we like it, parents are sometimes considered the enemy. Teenagers might see their moms and dads as judgmental and unconcerned about their lives. Two qualities, therefore, are crucial to being a role model.

1. A role model is understanding, not condescending.

When 13-year-old Jenny seemed especially upset about a boy not liking her at school, her father said, "That's nothing to worry about. You're too young to even think about boys." When the dad spoke those words, he was telling Jenny that her concerns were not important. Yet it was serious in her 13-year-old world. Role models try to connect with a teen to understand what he or she is going through. They do so without belittling the teen's problems or downplaying the triumphs.

2. A role model is a friend but also a leader. We often think that to be a role model to our teenager we must know the name of every new movie or be able to use teenage slang. That's not necessarily true.

While most role models understand the teen's life and are friendly, they also take on a leadership role with them. Role models provide answers, insight or suggestions about the teen's struggles — oftentimes from their own experiences.

How parents can be good role models

- *Be available.* Let your teenager know your door is always open. While your son or daughter may not beat down your door every time he or she has a question, your teen is more likely to do so when you have left that door open.

Say phrases such as "I'm always here for you" or "I'd love to hear about your day." Don't apply pressure, but let your teen know you are there for him or her.

- *Listen to your teen.* Being available to your teenager does not mean listening with one ear and then giving a long string of advice. Listen to your teen first, then ask follow-up questions. Don't jump in with advice (even when you clearly see what should be done). Instead, proceed slowly, asking your teen what he or she thinks should be done.

Being a role model to your teenager may seem like an impossible undertaking. But realize that your young person needs someone just like you — someone who loves him or her and who can point in the right direction.