7 WAYS TO BUILD A SOLID RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR TEEN

More than 78,000 students have graduated from SuperCamp’s learning and life skills programs since the first one was held in 1982. While our primary emphasis is helping turn teens into self-motivated learners, we’ve also spent a great deal of time with their parents—giving them new insights on how to support their children through the often-challenging teen years.

This report addresses seven areas that parents can focus on in order to strengthen their relationship with their teens and pre-teens.

1. BUILD RAPPORT WITH YOUR CHILDREN

To create the emotional engagement that is such an important element of solid relationships with our children, we need to build rapport with them. Rapport gives us on-ramps into our children’s lives, creating a way to enter their world, know their concerns, share their successes, and “speak their language.” Rapport helps us understand our children’s feelings and ideas, leading to better communication and solid relationships.

Built on mutual trust and emotional comfort, rapport develops over time and must be nurtured. It is, however, well worth every minute that you—and your children—put into it. When children feel understood and supported, they feel safe and happy—at home and in themselves.

When we reach a solid level of rapport with our children, we create a win-win “partnership” in which we’re able to speak honestly to each other, with love and respect. We have to remember, though, that this goes both ways—as much as we want to be able to communicate honestly to them, we have to allow them to do the same with us. We build mutual respect as we enter their world, and allow them to enter ours.

Here are several ways you can build and maintain rapport with your children:

- Know what they like, how they think, and how they feel about what’s happening in their lives. If you don’t know, ask.
- Know what keeps them from getting what they truly want. If you don’t know, ask.
- Try to imagine what they say to themselves, about themselves.
- Speak the truth to them clearly, in a way they can hear it and understand it.
- Have fun with them.
- Treat them as equals. (See Big Me Big You later in this report.)
- Trust them.
- Listen—really listen—to what your children say to you, and note their non-verbal communication as well. (See Active Listening later in this report)
- And last, but not least—allow and encourage your children to do all of the above with you.
Positive support, a nurturing environment, and good communication are essential for strong relationships with your children. Parents who make an effort to build rapport with their children will not only strengthen their relationships, but also build their children’s feelings of acceptance and trust. This in turn builds their self-confidence, a vital ingredient in their overall happiness.

2. CREATE A HOME COURT ADVANTAGE IN YOUR HOME

We know there’s a home court advantage in sports. In fact, studies have shown a clear statistical edge. For example, a recent study found that 25 of the 28 NBA teams that made the playoffs in the past 10 years had a winning record at home during the playoffs. Arena and stadium architects earn big dollars to make the edge even greater.

We can create that same advantage at home with our families. As adults and parents, we face plenty of challenges and pressures. We should realize though that our kids face a lot themselves—they have concerns about grades, peer pressure, figuring out where they fit in, schedules packed with activities, getting into college. And then, of course, they’re not immune to the ever-present media reporting of world crises, bullying, etc.

A home that’s felt to be a “safe harbor” allows us to breathe, drop those shoulders and actually relax—it’s a place that reduces stress, a place where we experience joy and feel a sense of wellbeing. The foundation of a home court advantage is a strong and stabilizing family culture, where family members talk to each other freely and comfortably and share such things as principles and values.

Thirty-six years ago, Bobbi DePorter, co-founder of Quantum Learning’s SuperCamp, developed the 8 Keys of Excellence principles to live by. Over the years, these 8 Keys have been adopted by countless individuals, families, businesses, and entire school districts. Jack Canfield, author of the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, said, “If the 8 Keys of Excellence was in every school in America and being taught in the homes, it would literally transform the country.”

People connect with the 8 Keys and find them meaningful in sometimes surprising ways. Once you fully adopt the 8 Keys, it’s been said you cannot NOT live them. To start, embrace them and make them part of your own life, then teach them to your family. When adopted by families, the 8 Keys create a common language and the ability to interact with one another in positive ways. Here are some thoughts on making the 8 Keys part of your family’s life.

The 8 Keys of Excellence

INTEGRITY – Match behavior with values
How often do you assume someone else values what you do? Have a family discussion about what each of you values. Make a list of shared family values. Talk about how they show up in your home. Do your family’s actions match their values?

FAILURE LEADS TO SUCCESS – Learn from mistakes
Reframe failures as learning experiences that provide information that’s needed to succeed and grow. Address a personal failure with three questions: What happened? What did you learn? How are you going to use what you learned? Help family members to do the same.

SPEAK WITH GOOD PURPOSE – Speak honestly and kindly
Before you speak, be mindful of the intention behind your words—make sure your intention is positive and your words are sincere. And remember to listen more and talk less—it leads to greater understanding and better
communication. If you’re trying to communicate with a family member and getting short dead-end responses, try “Tell me more.”

THIS IS IT! – Make the most of every moment
You’re happiest and get the most done when you’re focused on what you’re doing. A great way for parents to really connect with their kids is to make the most of their time with them. Focus totally on them, let go of electronics, show real interest in their interests. This, of course, works for other relationships, too!

COMMITMENT – Make your dreams happen
When you keep your promises to yourself and to others, you’re showing commitment. Help your family learn about commitment by creating a family goal with each person responsible for individual tasks leading to the main goal. Then track each other’s progress, help each other complete individual goals, and celebrate together when the family goal is attained.

OWNERSHIP – Take responsibility for actions
Be someone who can be counted on, who takes responsibility for everything you feel, say and do. As a family, you can discuss behaviors that are above the line (being responsible, accountable, and willing, which leads to choices and freedom) and those that are below the line (such as laying blame, justifying, denying, quitting). Acknowledge positive changes in behavior.

FLEXIBILITY – Be willing to do things differently
If you’re willing to recognize when something’s not working and change what you’re doing to achieve your desired outcome, you’re demonstrating flexibility. Help everyone in your family to understand that this willingness to be flexible creates a win-win situation for everyone involved.

BALANCE – Live your best life
When you allow yourself to focus on what you value most and your highest priorities, you experience a sense of wellbeing and fulfillment. As a family, discuss priorities. It’s been found that for most, spending time with family and friends as well as immersion in tasks of particular personal interest brings balance to one’s life.

When family members share these principles and values, when they feel comfortable at home with their family, they feel relaxed and safe. They feel a sense of belonging and they feel supported. In fact, safety, support, and belonging are the three core elements of a home court advantage. Make sure everyone in your family feels this advantage—it goes way beyond the family!

3. HELP YOUR TEEN THROUGH THE ROUGH PATCHES

During our 36 years of running SuperCamp programs, we have learned so much about teens and their challenges—and how adults can help them through those sometimes rough years. Here are some of the most important techniques that you can apply to help support your teen:

- A great communication tool for building relationships with teens is, Tell me more. If you get one of those dead-end responses to a question like How was your day, try Tell me more.

- When your teen has been hurt by something someone said or did to them, try asking them How do you feel? Tell them that how we feel and think about ourselves is a choice. We can’t control what happens to us but we can control how we react to it. Then ask How do you CHOOSE to feel?
• To help teens build self-esteem, acknowledge every effort. When your teen makes an effort and completes a task, stop for the high-five or the hug before urging them on to the next task.

• When you see FEAR (what we refer to as false expectations appearing real) in your teen, acknowledge it and show that you understand. Then ask What’s the worst that could happen? and What’s the best? Usually this will lead to more clarity about the perceived fear.

• Excelling in school—as well as in life—begins with a positive I CAN attitude. Encourage your teen to keep a positive attitude in all areas of their life. If they constantly look for what’s positive in any situation, they miss the negatives . . . or at least they don’t focus on them!

• Physiology affects learning. Our mind, body, and emotions are all connected—change one, you change them all. Remind your teen to walk tall into every class (even the most dreaded), sit up straight at their desk, focus on the teacher, fight off distractions—and concentrate on what the teacher is saying! Studies have shown that students in a state of focused concentration learn faster and more easily, and retain information longer. In other words, they maximize the moment of learning.

• If your teen is struggling with low motivation, help them find their passion—and the accompanying motivation—by asking them, What would you do—today, tomorrow, or in the future—if you knew you couldn’t fail? It may take more than one conversation, but the motivation can be immediate when a teen discovers their passion.

• Once they’ve identified their dream, help your teen to understand that they need to take ownership of pursuing it—no blaming, no excuses, no justifying, no giving up. You can encourage them and help them to make it part of their life, but make sure they understand that with dreams—If it’s to be, it’s up to me!

• If your teen is hitting the inevitable “bumps” on their road to success, remind them that Failure Leads to Success. And help them to change the way they think about failure. Instead of thinking that they are a failure, encourage them to think about failure as a valuable learning experience. When they learn from their mistakes rather than sending themselves negative messages, they are on the path to success.

• Remind your teen that Speaking with Good Purpose applies to what they say to themselves as well as what they say to others. They can use this to correct those voices in their heads that tell them negative things about themselves.

4. ACTIVE LISTENING

“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. . . . A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.”

—Rachel Naomi Remen

Before we consider active listening, let’s clarify the difference between listening and hearing. First, listening describes an intentional activity. When we’re listening, we’re actively trying to hear something. Hearing, on the other hand, is inactive. We do this without thinking. We’re aware of sounds, but we’re not paying attention. When we truly listen in a conversation, we hear the other person’s words and thoughts, not just sounds.

In active listening, we not only pay attention to the words the other person is conveying, but to their non-verbal communication, or “body language.” So much of what we communicate to one another is not put into words. In
fact, our eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and posture often say a lot more than our words. And this applies to both people in a conversation. It’s important that the listener also shows the speaker that they’re being heard and that what they’re saying is of interest. When the listener provides feedback, the person speaking feels more comfortable and will communicate more easily and honestly.

When someone is speaking to us and we truly listen to their words and notice their body language, it’s no longer just about sound. We hear and feel the other person’s thoughts, expectations, memories, beliefs, feelings. We connect with them, and in making this connection, we strengthen our relationship with them by building mutual understanding and trust.

Here are a few tips for practicing active listening. These suggestions will help parents build rapport with their children, but they’re obviously appropriate in any conversation.

- First, sit facing the other person with an open, "available" posture.
- Relax and really focus on what they’re saying, verbally and non-verbally. Put other things out of your mind and don’t allow yourself to be distracted. Shut off your phone.
- Maintain good eye contact.
- Actively show signs of listening throughout the conversation.
- Give encouragement by nodding your head, smiling when appropriate, affirmative words, etc.
- Show empathy with words or touch.
- Reflect feelings and content to show attention and comprehension.
- If appropriate, ask open-ended questions to help the person share their feelings. For example, How did that make you feel? rather than Were you hurt by what he said?—a dead-end question that only results in a yes or no response rather than further meaningful conversation.
- Ask relevant questions to clarify what the speaker has said.
- Be patient. Don’t jump in with questions or comments whenever there’s a pause. Give the speaker a chance to explore and express their thoughts and feelings.
- Avoid thinking about what you’re going to say next.
- Don’t interrupt. If you interrupt to make a point, you’re not listening.
- Try not to get ahead of the speaker by assuming what they’re going to say next. Let them finish.
- Avoid being judgmental in thoughts and words.

You'll be amazed at the difference active listening will make in your relationships with your children. In fact, active listening makes a difference in all relationships. Give it a try—it’s so simple to show others you care about them and about what they have to say.

“If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear.”

—Mark Twain

5. **DON’T BE A COMMUNICATION KILLER**
Beware! Some conversation responses—like reassurance, advice, and identification—that seem helpful on the surface can actually hinder positive communication, and may even end a conversation before it has a chance to become meaningful communication.

Here are the three don’ts that we teach at our SuperCamp and school programs: don’t deny, don’t resolve, and don’t me-too. They’ll be helpful in keeping communication open between you and your children as well as in other relationships.

- **Don’t deny**
  *Example: "You don't need to lose weight, you look fine."*
  When someone shares an experience, a fear, or a feeling ("I’m so fat.") and you respond with reassurance, you may mean to comfort them, but what you’re really doing is cutting off their sharing with the statement that they shouldn’t feel that way—you’re denying their feelings.

- **Don’t resolve**
  *Example: "If I were you I’d . . ."*
  When your teen tells you about a problem they’re having and you quickly hand them a solution, you shut them right down. Think about it. If you wanted to chat with a friend about a problem and maybe share some ideas, and they quickly throw a solution at you, it wouldn’t feel very good. Their two-minute solution to a problem you’ve been struggling with for weeks would probably (a) be unlikely to work, (b) be something you already thought of, and (c) be very likely to end the conversation.

- **Don’t me-too**
  *Example: "I know exactly what you mean, I . . ."*
  When your son or daughter begins to share something with you that they’re going through and you cut them off with a "Me, too" and go into a similar experience you had, perhaps when you were a teen, you’ve killed the conversation. They may never get to finish telling you about their experience, but they’ll know all about what happened to you.

None of these responses gives a conversation a chance. Often the best "conversations" are very one-sided as far as speaking is concerned. This relates to active listening (see number four above) and it’s a vital ingredient in meaningful communication. The "listener" listens very intently and hardly says a word, only contributing enough to let the other person know they’re really hearing them. Think about the difference active listening would have made in the three don’ts examples above.

Don’t kill a conversation with reassurance, advice, or identification. As difficult it is as a parent who wants to problem solve, your goal shouldn’t be to diagnose, pacify, or fix. Let your goal be to listen, and to let your child know they’re being heard.

6. **FOUR-PART APOLOGY**

The Four-Part Apology is another very effective communication tool that we teach students at SuperCamp. We also teach it to parents whenever we run a parent program at SuperCamp or in schools.

Take these four steps when you’ve wronged or hurt someone, or when you’ve made a mistake significant enough to impact someone else. A good way to remember the four steps—AAMR—is all about making it right. Here’s an example of how to use this approach with your son or daughter who’s upset that you’ve had to cancel plans with them on a few occasions.
• **Acknowledge**
  Take responsibility for what you’ve done. Use “I statements” to show that you’re the one behind the action: “I acknowledge that I’ve canceled our plans at the last minute more than once and that this is upsetting for you.”

• **Apologize**
  “I apologize for wasting your time and for hurting you by making you feel unwanted.”

• **Make it right**
  Ask “How can I make it right?” If your child doesn’t have anything specific in mind, suggest something such as “Why don’t we plan something special for next Saturday—just you and me?”

• **Recommit**
  Show that your intention is to not let it happen again. “From now on, if I make plans with you I won’t cancel them unless a real emergency comes up.”

We believe the words “I apologize” are much more powerful than “sorry.” How often have you heard a nonchalant “I’m sorry” or just "Sorry" as if that would fix everything. At one of the schools where our Quantum Learning methods are used, the principal caught a young elementary school child doing something that was against the rules. When the principal spoke to her the girl mumbled a casual “Sorry.” The principal said, “You know, Elizabeth, in this school we use a Four-Part Apology.” The little girl replied, “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.” I guess she hadn’t quite learned the process, but she did get a laugh from the principal.

The power of the Four-Part Apology lies in its ability to demonstrate that you’re taking responsibility for your actions. When the people in your life, including your children, realize that you’re willing and able to do that, they’ll be more open and trusting with you—and your relationships will be stronger.

7. **BIG ME BIG YOU**

Here’s a look at various types of relationships. As you’ll see, the first one—*big me big you*—is the only equal-value relationship. Unfortunately, this is not the most common, especially with parents and their kids, but it is definitely the most desirable and the most powerful—and the one we should strive for in all our relationships. Parents may think this relationship will not work with their children, but please read on. *Big me big you* does not diminish authority—it communicates respect and builds rapport.

![That's a great idea—let's explore it.](image)

**BIG ME BIG YOU**

![I know better! You messed up again—you must do it my way.](image)

**BIG ME LITTLE YOU**

*SuperCamp – Learning, Leadership and Life Skills Summer Camps  1-800-228-5327 info@SuperCamp.com*
I don’t know—you’re the expert. What do you want me to do?
LITTLE ME BIG YOU

You don’t know? Me neither. You don’t like it? Me neither. Life’s not easy.
LITTLE ME LITTLE YOU

Big Me Big You
A big me big you relationship is a positive equal-value relationship. It sends the messages: I value you and you value me. What you want is just as important as what I want, what you feel is just as important as what I feel, and what you think is just as important as what I think. It doesn’t matter what position of authority one may have—parent, boss, teacher—big me big you is the only relationship that is effective in building rapport. It communicates I respect you and I value you. It doesn’t matter how “good” either person is—how smart, how popular, what their position is, or where they live—this relationship is about respect and compassion. Big me big you is a win-win relationship, and it’s ideal for parent and child.

Big Me Little You
This relationship is the more common one between parents and children. Big me little you sends the messages: What you have to say is not as important as what I have to say. What you think is not as important as what I think. What you want to do is not as important as what I want to do. You don’t know how to do things right unless I tell you. All of these messages—whether the result of actual or perceived superiority in position, knowledge, social standing, etc.—have an extremely negative impact on any relationship. Big me little you does not build rapport. It is a relationship where the vital ingredient of equal value is missing.

Little Me Big You
This is a relationship where one person forces another into the “big” position. It comes into play with parents and children when the child acts in a know-it-all way with the parent. The parent will then turn it around and tell the child to come up with the solution given that they’re “the expert.” Obviously, little me big you is not a healthy equal-value relationship.

Little Me Little You
This is the unhealthiest of all relationships. The message here is I don’t value you, you don’t value me, and we don’t value anything. A parent-teen relationship can devolve to this level as both participants feed on each other’s negativity. It is a highly destructive relationship. One way to move out of this relationship is to introduce one of the participants to a third party who has something positive in common with them in the hope that a healthier relationship may develop.
SUMMARY

Relationships are a two-way street, as is communication. In building a stronger relationship with your teen, the more you can lead by example with any or all of the techniques described in this report, the more success you will have and the more open and positive your connection will be with your child.