

STRATEGIES FOR **PARENTS & TEENS**

BACK TO SCHOOL

Parents of Middle & High Schoolers



MAKING
CARING
COMMON
PROJECT



FACING
HISTORY &
OURSELVES

In partnership with



INTRODUCTION

This toolkit provides resources to help you support your teen in developing a reflective and caring mindset during the opening days of the school year. It includes conversation starters and other strategies to foster open, supportive, and reflective dialogue between you and your teen that focuses on community and empathy and works to reinforce the values and principles that help create a caring community.

By modeling and sharing values that encourage your teen to be a caring community member, you can play a crucial role in helping your teen transition into a new school year.

OBJECTIVES

- Build meaningful connection with your teen
- Support your teen as they navigate the start of the school year
- Support your teen in being a caring and empathetic community member





1 | SELF-REFLECTION

Start with Yourself

Begin by reflecting on your past experiences in communities with others. What are some elements that have helped you feel a sense of belonging and connection and what are some elements that caused you to feel a lack of belonging or connection? Thinking back on your own experiences over time, in what ways have elements of your identity helped you feel part of, or outside of, the communities you have engaged in? What positive contributions have you made to communities you have been a part of? As a teen, what did the start of the school year feel like for you?

Taking time to reflect on your past experiences can help you remain mindful of the challenges and joys of being in community with others and remain open and empathetic to your teen and their experiences navigating the start of a new school year.

SELF-REFLECTION



Our identity and values impact how we show up in community with others. By reflecting on our values, beliefs, and different aspects of our identity, we can be more intentional in our interactions with our community.



Questions to **REFLECT** on:

QUESTIONS ABOUT IDENTITY:

- Who am I?
- What factors make up my identity?
- What parts of my identity are visible and what parts are invisible?
- What parts of my identity are most important for me to share with others?
- How is my identity shaped by group membership and privilege or lack of privilege?
- What parts of my identity have the greatest impact on how I engage in community with others and how might these parts be similar and different for my teen?

QUESTIONS ABOUT VALUES AND BELIEFS:

- What are my core beliefs about being in community with others?
- What factors helped to shape these core beliefs?
- How might these core beliefs influence my teen when they are outside of our home?
- How do they shape how I want to show up for my teen as they enter the new school year?



2 | ROUTINES TO BUILD CONNECTION

A new school year means the start of new schedules and routines. During this time of transition, it can help to incorporate meaningful routines at home that create a space for your teen to express their emotions. This can also be a great time to reflect together on capacities such as **empathy** as well as on the value of expanding one's **circle of concern**. Talking openly and explicitly about your teen's own experiences with belonging and community as well as the role they can play in fostering a sense of belonging and community for their peers at school will help them navigate the new school year with confidence and care.

The structure of reflective and supportive routines at home provide a sense of safety and emotional security for teens. They can also help you find effective ways to connect with your teen.



Empathy:

The capacity to take other perspectives, to experience other people's feelings and to value others, including those who are different from us.

Circle of concern:

A group of people we think about, care about, and interact with in ways that are kind and thoughtful. It's important that we support teens in expanding their circle of concern, helping them to care for people who are, for example, different or unfamiliar in some way, as well as for people who may fall off their radar.



ROUTINES TO BUILD CONNECTION

You know your child best. As you read through the routines, think about which ones would be most effective and enjoyable for you and your teen. Once a routine is introduced, it can serve as a quick and easy way to connect and get a sense of what's on each other's minds.



WHEN:

Incorporate these routines into family dinners, drives, during down time at home, bedtime, before or after school. Think about what makes sense for you and your family's schedule.

HOW:

Follow your teen's lead

- Not every conversation has to be heavy and having that expectation could feel overwhelming for your teen

Engage in active listening

- Try to put your phone and other distractions out of sight
- Focus on your teen and what they are sharing with you

- Don't interrupt - talking out loud, uninterrupted, will help them learn to process and problem solve for themselves
- Express empathy and curiosity

Refrain from asking how they are feeling too frequently

- It can cause your teen to shut down or become anxious about their feelings.

WHY:

The routines on the next page can help you connect with your teen, open the doors for them to process their experiences, and provide opportunities for you to explicitly incorporate values of care and empathy for others into your conversations.

ROUTINES TO BUILD CONNECTION

Thumb-o-Meter:

A few times a week, or whenever it makes sense for you and your teen, take turns rating how you're doing using a "thumb scale" - up for positive emotions, down for negative emotions, and sideways for so-so emotions. Reflect on and share with each other what is contributing to your rating. *Variation: Give one rating for school and one for home.*

Rose, Thorn, and Bud:

A few times a week, or whenever it makes sense for you and your teen, reflect on your day (or week) and share a rose (something positive that happened), a thorn (a challenge you encountered), and a bud (something you are looking forward to). Also, consider including the whole family by inviting everyone to share their Rose, Thorn, and Bud at a family dinner or some other family occasion.

Mistakes as Learning Opportunities:

The beginning of the school year can be filled with new experiences and sometimes mistakes made can feel overwhelming and all consuming. If your teen is upset about a mistake they have made and they are having a tough time getting through it, remind them that everyone makes mistakes. However, it is the stories we tell ourselves about our mistakes that can make them feel like either learning opportunities or failures. When appropriate, share with your teen mistakes you have made and how you have learned and grown from them (how they have been learning opportunities). Invite your teen to talk

about how they might turn their own mistake into a learning opportunity that they can grow from throughout the school year.

- Refer to **Making Caring Common** to learn more

Daily Debrief (Personal Reflection)

Returning home after expending a lot of emotional and physical energy can be challenging; create a simple and quick routine to support your teen in this transition. Keep it simple – ask your teen to share about their day using one of the following prompts:

- What is something good, hard, and/or new that happened today or is going to happen this week?
- In one sentence, how was your day?
- What emoji represents how you felt today?
- Who did you sit with at lunch today?
- What made you smile today?
- What is something you are proud of?
- What is something new you learned or tried?



ROUTINES TO HELP YOUR TEEN BE COMMUNITY MINDED

Daily Debrief (Community Version):

This routine can also be used to help explore and share family values around being active community members. Engaging in these conversations communicates the importance of being a positive community member and practicing kindness. Consider asking your teen one of the following prompts to explore opportunities for noticing and enacting kindness at school:

- What is one kind thing you saw someone do today?
- What is one kind thing you did for someone else today?
- What is one kind thing someone did for you today?
- What is one word you would use to describe your school community today?
- Did you meet anyone new today?
- Did you notice anyone who needed support today? How did you, or can you, support them?

Caring Goals:

Weekly or monthly, set goals together to expand your circle of concern and show empathy for others. Share with your teen why you find it important to expand your circle of concern and ask about ways they might like to expand theirs. Committing to acts of kindness together can help you both follow-through on your goals and it helps model for your teen some ways to be a caring community member. Some examples of goals can be:

- Do one kind thing for a stranger this week
- Set aside time to volunteer at a local organization together
- Check in with an elderly family member weekly
- Host a monthly clean up in your community

Three Good Things:

Practice gratitude with your teen by naming three good things that happened to each of you that day. Say your three good things aloud or record them in a shared notebook. Variations:

- Three acts of kindness you witnessed
- Three positive interactions or relationships
- Three moments of joy





3 | INCORPORATE SELF-CARE

Consider the self-care that you need in order to parent the way that suits you best. Taking time to attend to your own needs provides support for your teen in the long run. Naming what type of self-care you need and helping your teen identify their own needs builds self-awareness and care in your relationship. Prioritizing moments for self-care better enables you to have a positive and supportive relationship with each other and with your community. Demonstrate to your teen the importance of taking the time to identify and practice these rituals.

Why start now:

Starting at the beginning of the school year will help establish the practice of these routines before the year gets busier and teens risk feeling burnt out.

RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

Journaling

Set aside time each day or week for journaling. If possible, do it in the same room with your teen to demonstrate a shared commitment to the task. Use journaling prompts or set a timer and just write what comes to mind. Some prompts might include:

- Reflect on a meaningful interaction you had today
- Write about a challenge you faced today
- Write about three things you are grateful for
- Write about a moment of self-care or relaxation that you enjoyed recently

Book Club/Media Club

Reading or watching TV is a great source of relaxation for teens and adults. Capitalize on this enjoyment by identifying books or TV shows that you and your teen can enjoy together, either side-by-side or individually. Choose media that highlight diverse voices and perspectives. Come together to discuss and share what you've seen and read.

- Refer to [Common Sense Media](#) for book or TV show ideas



RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

Sharing Interests & Coping Skills

Build connection by identifying **coping skills** and activities that you and your teen can enjoy doing together. This type of engagement provides an opportunity for you to model some healthy ways you manage stress as well as an opportunity for greater communication and joy. It can be taking a walk, gardening, cooking, drawing, puzzling, etc. Being actively engaged in something together can ease the pressure when it comes to having more challenging conversations; so as you spend time together on something, build in conversations about important topics, interests, wonderings, or worries.

Support System

Share with your teen what a **support system** is and who is in yours and why. Invite your child to choose 2-4 contexts (home, school, athletic team, performance cohort, etc.) that they are involved in and reflect on the following questions together:

- Who can you depend on the most in your support system? How do they support you?
- Is there an area of your life that you could use more support?
- Are you in anyone's support system?
- How do you show people in your support system gratitude?

If your child struggles to identify people for their support system, reflect with them on what might make someone a good support and explore different ways they might ask for support.



Coping Skill:

Something you can do to help you take a break from and/or manage difficult emotions.

Support System:

A support system includes people that you can count on that can help you with your emotions or if you have a problem. They are people who you trust will help take care of you.

