

What to Say When Your Teen Shuts Down

Simple language that lowers pressure, protects connection, and keeps the door open.

When a teen shuts down, asking more questions, lecturing, or demanding an immediate answer often increases pressure. The goal is not to force the conversation. The goal is to communicate safety, care, and a clear invitation to reconnect.

When they say, "I'm fine."

"Okay. I will not force you to talk right now. I care about you, and I am available when you are ready."

When they walk away

"I can see this conversation is too much right now. Let's pause. I want us to come back to it later, when we are both calmer."

When you are worried

"You do not have to explain everything, but I need to know whether you are safe. Are you thinking about hurting yourself or someone else?"

When they expect criticism

"I am not starting this conversation to punish you. I want to understand what happened from your point of view."

When emotions are high

"We do not have to solve this tonight. Let's focus on getting through this moment, and we can make a plan tomorrow."

When you made things worse

"I came in too strongly, and I think that made it harder for you to talk to me. I am sorry. I want to try again differently."

When you need a boundary

"I respect that you do not want to talk right now. The issue still needs to be addressed, so we will return to it at ____."

When they finally begin talking

"Thank you for telling me. I am going to listen first. Do you want me to just hear you, help you solve it, or help you decide what to do next?"

Try to Avoid

- “Why are you acting like this?”
- “You need to tell me right now.”
- “After everything I do for you...”
- Rapid-fire questions or repeated demands for eye contact.
- Turning the first disclosure into a lecture, consequence, or interrogation.

Remember

Connection does not mean removing every limit. You can remain calm, caring, and curious while still holding appropriate boundaries.

A Three-Step Formula

1. Notice	“I can see you are overwhelmed.”
2. Reduce pressure	“You do not have to explain everything right now.”
3. Keep the door open	“I care about you, and we will come back to this.”