

5 Things to Say When Your Teen Shuts Down

A short, practical guide for parents navigating silence, withdrawal, and shut-down moments with warmth.

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If you've ever watched your teen go quiet — door closed, one-word answers, eyes anywhere but on you — you already know how helpless it can feel. Your instinct is to reach them. Their instinct is to protect themselves from more pressure, even well-meaning pressure. Both of you want the same thing: connection. The five phrases below are drawn from trauma-informed and CBT-based approaches I use with families every week. None of them force an answer. All of them keep the door open.

1 Name it before you try to fix it

"Something feels off right now. You don't have to talk about it yet — I'm just here."

Teens shut down partly because they expect a lecture or a rapid-fire list of questions the moment they show emotion. Naming what you notice, without demanding a response, signals safety instead of pressure. It keeps the door open rather than triggering the urge to close it further.

2 Trade the question for an offer

"I'm going to be in the kitchen for a while. Come find me if you want to talk, or just want company."

"What's wrong?" often lands as an interrogation, especially for a nervous system that's already on edge. Offering your presence instead of demanding disclosure reduces the pressure to perform an answer they haven't found yet — and many teens open up later, on their own timeline, because of it.

3 Reflect the feeling, not the behavior

"You seem really frustrated. That makes sense given how today went."

When we respond to the behavior (slammed door, silence, snapping) instead of the feeling underneath it, teens hear judgment. Reflecting the emotion shows them you can tolerate their distress without needing them to manage yours — which is often what allows them to finally manage their own.

4 Give a real choice, not a forced one

“Would it help to talk now, later tonight, or would you rather write it down and show me?”

Shutdown is frequently a control response to feeling powerless. Offering genuine options — including a non-verbal one — restores a sense of agency without requiring them to “perform” openness before they’re ready.

5 End with connection, not a lesson

“I love you. I’m proud of you for getting through today, even the hard parts.”

It’s tempting to close a hard moment with a teaching point. But when a teen is already shut down, another lesson reads as more pressure. Ending in warmth instead builds the relational safety that makes future conversations easier — which is the actual goal.

A gentle reminder

You don’t need to get every moment right. Teens don’t need a parent who always says the perfect thing — they need a parent who keeps showing up after the imperfect ones. That consistency is what actually builds trust over time.

If shutdown moments are becoming frequent, lasting a long time, or you’re noticing signs of anxiety, depression, or risk, please reach out to a licensed clinician for support — you don’t have to navigate this alone.

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Look out for the Teen Success Journal, coming soon.