

5 Secrets for Communicating with Teenagers

by Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC from Empowering Parents website



Does this sound familiar? Your teenage son is taking forever in the bathroom (again), but you need him to get ready so you can get to work on time. You're thinking, "How could I have raised such an inconsiderate kid? He's so disrespectful!" Meanwhile, your child is locked in the bathroom, consumed with his image in the mirror. He's thinking, "No way am I going to school with this pimple on my nose." Outside in the hallway, you start pounding on the door, yelling at him to hurry up. He screams, "God, you just don't understand! Leave me alone!" When he finally emerges, he gives you the silent treatment. Not only that, he's missed the bus, so you have to drive him to school. You end up late for work and completely overwhelmed, wondering, "Why doesn't my kid listen to me? Does he have to fight me on *everything*?"

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You and your teen: two different worlds, two different perspectives—and a giant disconnect that can make communicating a real mystery. As a therapist and the mother of three teenagers myself, I know firsthand that the more you push your kids, the more they get defensive and dig in their heels; they become reactive in the form of explosiveness or shutting down. And they're thinking, "My parents don't have a clue, so what's the point of trying to explain myself? I'll just tune them out." Clamming up or exploding are both ways your teenagers attempt to manage their stress and defend themselves. That's because distance and explosiveness are often the only ways your teen knows how to communicate when things get intense—which of course only causes more conflict.

Here are 5 secrets that I've found to be really helpful personally for communicating with kids through the difficult adolescent years.

1. The secret to opening your child's ears: Here's a simple secret that will help you in everything you do with your teen: No matter how hard it might be, try to start all interactions with your child with understanding, even if you don't fully agree or even quite comprehend what they're talking about. Here's an example: Your teenage daughter is not doing her schoolwork, and instead is online with friends chatting. It drives you crazy because you're thinking, "If she fails another test, her average will go down and she'll never get into college. What kind of future will she have?" Your teen, on the other hand is thinking, "I have to get online and talk with Skyler. If we don't make up after the fight we had in the hall today, all the other girls will be against me and I'll have no one to hang out with at school tomorrow." Again, two different worlds. Try to start by saying, "I understand how difficult it is for you when you have a fight with one of your friends. I also know that you need to pass this test tomorrow. Schoolwork is your job and it's your responsibility to do it to the best of your abilities. Let's sit down and think of a good way you can manage your time tonight." Be sure not to say "I understand, but..." which will simply disqualify

what you've just said. Start from a place of understanding, and try to put yourself in your child's shoes first before telling her what needs to change. I've found that doing this tends to "open kids' ears." Instead of feeling like they have to defend themselves against you, they actually listen.

2. Take the emotionality out of the equation. Emotion is your enemy when you're trying to get through to your teen. Remind yourself that what he says and does is not a reflection on you. You may not like how he's behaving—or even how he's thinking—but keep your emotions out of it, even if his behavior impacts you. I'm not saying this is an easy thing to do; it's tough, but it's a skill you can learn just like any other. In fact, I tell parents to repeat this slogan to themselves before talking to their kids: "This is just like a business transaction; it's nothing personal." When you really think about it, there's no reason to be mad at your child for being himself. He may be making a poor choice, but the truth is, he might not yet have the skill set to make a better one. So your job is to help guide him to better choices so he can in turn develop a better skill set. When you realize what your job is as a parent, it will help you be less emotional. When you feel frustrated, remember, don't take it personally. Tell yourself that this is simply a problem to solve, and part of "parenting business as usual."

3. Ask curious questions...not loaded questions. Ask your teen for his ideas and be collaborative. Let him see that you believe in him and that you're not mad at him for struggling in his life. When you let him see that you have faith in his abilities and he has the space to work things out on his own, you will begin to develop true confidence in him. Don't ask loaded questions that put your child on the defensive like, "Why can't you get up on time? What's wrong with you?" Instead, try opening a conversation with, "Eli, do you have any ideas for how you might get up on time?" If he says he doesn't know, offer a few of your own and ask which one would work for him. Let your teen know that his problems are *his* to solve. Don't step into his "box." Rather, you are there to help him figure out solutions—and to let him deal with the natural consequences of his behavior.

Your goal is to help your child think for himself, which will in turn help him feel like he has some control over his world. Listen openly to what he says and ask him to think critically about each choice. What will work and what will be problematic about each decision? What would be the natural consequences of each choice—and how would he feel about dealing with that?

4. Don't be needy; stand on your own two feet. Don't "need" your teen's cooperation, validation, or good behavior. As soon as you need something from your child so that you can feel better, you have put yourself in a vulnerable position because he does not have to give it to you. When you need something and don't get it, you will naturally try harder by controlling and manipulating more. And your teen will become more and more defiant or passively compliant—neither of which is good.

The truth is, you don't need anyone else to prop you up. You can validate yourself and solve your own problems. So if your child is acting out, that's his problem. *Your* problem is to decide how you will choose to behave toward him. That's in your hands, not his. Ask yourself, "How do I want to act, no matter how he is acting? What can I put up with and what can't I?" Take back your power and say to yourself, "If my child is screaming at me, instead of needing him to stop, I can turn around and walk away and not engage." Let him know you won't talk with him until he can approach you with civility. Here's the truth:

when you aren't trying to get your child to change or shape up, you will be able to think of better choices for yourself. And your child will be less defiant because he will have no one to resist. When you're not trying to control him and you're not reacting to him, he will have to wrestle with himself rather than with you.

5. Don't do anything until you're both calm. Another rule of thumb is to avoid doing *anything* until you and your child have both calmed down. The fact is, you don't have to respond to your child when you are upset, or when your child is upset and in your face. You just don't. You can say nothing. You can take a few minutes or more if you need to. When emotions have evened out, you can sit down and talk with him. It's never good to try to bring up a difficult subject or resolve a conflict in the heat of the moment. So if either you or your child is upset, pause and come back when you can address things in a calmer way.

If you attempt a conversation with your child and he's rude or out of line, that's when you have to hold on to yourself and make sure you don't get dragged into a fight. If your relationship with your child is such that it's impossible to have an open, respectful conversation at this point in time, remember that it's still your job to stay firmly planted. Have a slogan that you say to yourself like, "I'm not going there no matter what." If you can do that consistently, over time the baiting and antagonism should calm down. And don't feel badly if you get pulled back in occasionally—staying strong isn't easy. The good news is that the more you refuse to engage, the easier it will get to stay calm.

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