Five Communication Tips for Dealing with Parent-Teen Conflict

Facing and Resolving Conflicts with Teenagers

Communication can be a challenge for parents and kids at any age - but for parents of teenagers, things can really fall apart. During this age where it’s the job of parents and teens to pull apart and renegotiate their relationship to each other, conflict can become the norm instead of the exception when it comes to trying to communicate and interact with each other. Experts advice trying to keep those lines of communication open, while still continuing to respect the “growing up” transitions that you are both going through.

1. Avoid unnecessary conflict  this is another way of reminding parents of the old advice to “pick your battles.” Speaking from experience, it is easy to get locked into a mode of conflict over things that in the big picture, really don’t matter at all. This doesn’t mean that a parent should avoid confrontation about big issues (like drugs and alcohol, school attendance, and other potentially harmful and dangerous choices) to avoid conflict, but it does mean that letting go on what your child wears or how he does his hair.

2. Choose your words carefully  One therapist who specializes in working with “acting out” teens and their families told me that a good rule of thumb is to speak to your teenagers as you would to another adult. This is far easier said than done because they will certainly not always be acting or speaking like an adult to you. However, she pointed out that it models respectful behavior and puts you in a positive position of acting “as if.” There are many times when it is just better to keep quiet until things have cooled off and you can put things back into perspective.

3. Negotiate, Accommodate and Compromise  You don’t have to do all of these at once, but they are grouped together in a family of conflict resolution techniques. While negotiating with a 2-year-old may have seemed impossible, it is possible to negotiate and compromise with a teenager. Of course, this first means that both parties need to be open to having such an interaction. This probably won’t work in the heat of an argument. Step away and come back to resolve the situation. There is no shame in a parent giving in when a teenager may be right or have a reasonable point of view or request. Being able to admit mistake and make sincere apology are important skills for any parent. It can help to build trust and model accommodating adult behavior.
4. Let Go of the Past  Once a problem has been solved, or an event or instance has passed, let it stay in the past. Bringing up a string of misdeeds in the heat of argument will only serve to make things worse. Teenagers make mistakes and errors in judgment - it is developmentally appropriate behavior. By letting go of their past behaviors and actions, you will be letting her know you are not only making room for her evolution, but also expecting that she will change and evolve. Parents can get stuck in the “I can’t trust you because you did XYZ” and this doesn’t allow for the teen to learn and move on. Of course, it might take a few starts and stops - it’s no different from when she was learning to walk or ride a bicycle.

5. Assert Authority  Save this one for the real biggies - emergencies and dangerous situations where you need to act quickly and be “the parent.” Some kids will truly push those boundaries and test your ability to stay in control as a parent (I have one of those!). This doesn’t mean to use force (which seldom is even remotely reasonable with teenagers), it means to draw the line and assert that you are, in fact, still the parent and are the final say in the situation. The abuse of this technique is one of the main reasons parents and teens get stuck in conflict and “willful disobedience,” so again, save it for emergencies!

I cannot promise that life with teenagers will be smooth sailing if you use these conflict resolution and communication techniques. In fact, conflict seems to be part of the “sacred dance” teenagers and parents do as the chicks prepare to fledge the nest. Still, one expert told me that if you are able to maintain connection and a relationship during these trying years with your teen, you will have a strong bond in later years.

Avoid Power Struggles

Challenging authority is a normal part of teen behavior. It’s one way teens assert their independence and establish their own identities. This can be particularly true when it comes to interacting with their parents. Teens may try to test you. And they can be very good at pushing your buttons.

Although it may be difficult, do your best to avoid power struggles with your teen. Active listening, setting the right tone and being clear and consistent can help keep the conversation focused and productive. If your teen insists on being argumentative, you might try this: simply refuse to argue. Your teen may find this disarming. And cutting down on the fireworks can open the door to more productive conversations about smart driving.