

# 3

### **A scenario**

The days when your son would fly off of the bus and through the front door to show you what "fun things" he had done in school that day are long gone. Now that he is 14, you feel lucky on the days when you get anything more than a grunt when he walks through the door. His usual answer to any question is either "fine" or "nothing." His shutting down, and therefore shutting you out, is frustrating to you. When you suspect something might be bothering him and ask about it, he abruptly closes the door on any possible communication. You want to know more about his experiences at school and with friends, and you wish he would spend more time just talking with you. But you also want to respect his privacy and need for "space."

*How would you approach this situation with your child? Would you take some action to encourage communication, or would you "leave him alone" and hope he decides to talk to you at some point?*

## Chapter Three: Overview and objectives

Communication...such an important topic! So much of our success in any relationship depends on good communication. We are aware of its importance, but not always able to see how we can improve our communication. In this chapter our focus shifts to the communication in your family and how you can impact it positively. By highlighting some of the obstacles that frequently get in the way, we hope to sensitize you to communication in all of its forms. We'll share some strategies that will help you to enhance your family's communication environment. Setting limits and disciplining teenagers fall into this chapter as well.

### **Objectives**

In this chapter you will:

- Take a brief look at what good communication looks like in a family setting.
- Learn about communication by highlighting obstacles and examining elements that are inherent in good communication.
- Study several different strategies to enhance communication with your adolescent.
- Examine the recommendations of two authors with regard to setting limits and consequences.

*“Frustrating parents, teens want to be with them except when they don’t, teens want their help except when they don’t, and teens behave in excitingly more mature ways—except when they don’t. . . . Throughout, they need parents to remain available, taking the emotional high ground by providing opportunities for closeness that teens can sometimes accept and sometimes reject.” A. Rae Simpson<sup>1</sup>*

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## Chapter Three: Instructions

### ***Reader Instructions***

How to get the most out of this chapter:

- There is a lot of very concrete information in this chapter so we encourage you to take your time with it and be sure to prepare the exercises. By creating your own guidelines (page 75) you will be offering important advice for yourself. There are many worthwhile exercises that will heighten your observations and self-analysis on pages 76, 77, 78, 79, 81, 87, and 88. The discussion of disciplining teens is explored in exercises on pages 92 and 93; share some advice on 96.
- Examine the issues and questions on page 97. Discuss the most relevant questions with a friend, spouse, or in your parenting discussion group, if you have one.
- Be sure to write down your “take-aways.” These insights will help you translate your intentions into actions.

### ***If you have a parenting discussion group:***

#### ***Group Recommendations/ Reminders***

- Begin by asking how you were able to apply what you learned at the last meeting as you put your “take-aways” into action.
- Ask each group member to identify which of the issues on page 97 they wish to discuss.
- The facilitator for the meeting can guide the group discussion to ensure that the issues of greatest interest to group members are examined and explored, and that all group members participate.
- See page 11 for more recommendations for group leaders.



Be sure to access supplementary and current information on this topic at [www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com](http://www.PleaseStoptheRollercoaster.com).

## Communication

*As adults, we need to be prepared to take on more than our fair share of the responsibility in making communication successful, and mutually fulfilling, with our kids.*

*Don't forget that a significant amount of communication comes in forms other than through words. Tone of voice, body language, attentiveness, eye contact—all of these more subtle ways of communicating carry more weight than you may realize.*

Communication is one of the most discussed, examined, and stressed about issues between parents and teens. Do we currently enjoy honest and open communication? Precious few parents say “yes” to that question. What are we doing wrong? You’ve heard the complaints: “Sara will talk and laugh with her friends on the phone, but when she comes down to dinner, she clams right up.” “My daughter communicates with me—at the top of her lungs!” “I don’t know what is going on in my son’s life because he won’t talk to me!” Obviously, there are calm and positive moments to counteract the challenging ones, but chances are, this is an area that can improve.

Like a river flowing through an ever changing landscape, sometimes calm and serene, other times churning and out of control, our communication within our family unit is responsive to the environment and situation present at the time. And communication ebbs and flows, responding to the changes in all of us as our family grows dynamically.

Most parents want the “key” to open the door to good communication. Would that it be so simple! As is the case in making most relationships successful, there is work involved here: thoughtful, objective, adult, unselfish work.

Communication is a two way street, and it is truly more about listening than about speaking. Listening has many different levels to it. Although exact numbers vary according to the particular study, the figures are all similar in their overall message; words are just a small part of communication.

As adults, we have learned to take in communication in all of its forms without even thinking about it. But to *intentionally tune in* to the various types of messages more closely may open up volumes of information to you and bring a new level of understanding. It is worthwhile to consciously sensitize yourself to communication forms that may not come as naturally to you. It requires openness on your part.

**Communication (cont.)**

*Being attentive to body language can give us important information.*

My son had tickets to attend a concert by his favorite band. He had invited many friends, but due to the fact that it was a mid-week evening shortly after the beginning of the school year, nobody was available. His desperation was palpable. He was only a high school freshman at the time, and I had offered to drive him and a friend. I was willing to entertain myself elsewhere during the concert to provide the necessary transportation home. But, as he was coming up empty with available companions, it looked like I was the lucky winner of a concert ticket. I knew he was uncomfortable going with me, but I was trying to make the best of it. It wasn't until we were in the car driving south on the highway and he lowered the window next to the passenger seat, *practically hanging out of it*, that I realized just how painful it was for him to be going to this concert with his mom. His body language spoke volumes and gave me a great deal of information about his level of discomfort, and, consequently, about my approach.



There may have been times you've been criticized for being a poor communicator in one way or another; perhaps others have noticed you're not a good listener or that you're not as observant as you could be. Perhaps you've given mixed signals that were confusing to others. Think about where your communication may be deficient. Be as honest and specific as you can be. Then think about a specific situation with your child when this deficiency came between the two of you. Now, write *two* guidelines for yourself to remember to overcome this deficiency.

(A guideline might be: "*listen completely before I respond,*" or "*don't assume I understood what she said; ask questions to clarify.*")

1.)

2.)

## Communication (cont.)

It is helpful to give some consideration to what good communication looks like. By breaking it down, you may be able to identify both what you do well and areas that can use improvement. Although there are many areas where your communication style may be perfect for your family, there is always room for improvement.

### Good communication consists of the following things:

**Give and take** Good communication goes in both directions. As we focus on facilitating growth in our children, we need to ask ourselves if our communication style is helping to foster their development. Are you supporting his originality and helping him develop confidence in himself and his ideas? Are you providing an open environment for her to share her thoughts? Your teenager's thoughts and points of view may be different from yours. Do you support her originality? We know his ideas will change over time during adolescence; do you provide an environment that enables him to experiment with his new and changing ideas? Who better than you to listen to her thoughts and points of view? Are you *listening*? Or, as parents, are you doing too much of the talking? Many parents spend more time sharing their own wisdom than listening to the developing thoughts of the next generation. Do you have the right balance between teaching and learning? Think about spending less time on your podium and more time being an active listener, supporting a developing mind.



How often are you working harder to push your point than to understand hers?



*Elaine, 14*

"Tell me about yourself and your mistakes so I don't feel so tiny in your presence."<sup>2</sup>

## Communication (cont.)

**Respect and honesty** Sharing honest, forthright, respectful attitudes towards our children as they are growing yields the same return as they get older. Chances are there will be bumps in the road during adolescence, but you will be much better prepared to handle these if your teenager is confident in receiving a basic level of respect from you. Honesty and respect in a family dynamic create an environment for positive communication as children reach young adulthood.



How would your teenager answer this question: Do your parents treat you with respect? Try to answer the question yourself. Then test your answer by asking your teenager to answer it, too.

**Trust** Can he count on you? When you say you'll do something, are you true to your word? When she confides in you can she count on your word of confidentiality? Can he count on you not to embarrass him in front of his peers?

In *The Other 90%*, Robert K. Cooper states that "trust advances one brief interaction at a time. Each human point of contact either opens or closes a door." He suggests there are three specific actions that you can take that will positively impact your ability to increase trust through your communication.<sup>3</sup> They are:

- *Breathe before you speak.* It slows the world down a bit, it allows you to increase empathy, patience and curiosity. It gives you an opportunity to focus on making eye contact.
- *Be clear about time.* If you have limited time to spend at a particular moment it's good to let your child know that up front. But reassure her that if she needs more time you'll arrange for it. Your commitment to make more time when necessary makes your child feel valued; rushing through your communication with your kids all too often undermines the relationship.
- *Sit down rather than stand.* Not only does communication that occurs when sitting down feel more sincere, it is particularly important to get on eye level with kids. It can increase the trust you're trying to build.

## Communication (cont.)



Without basic trust there can be little meaningful communication. Can your child count on you unconditionally? How would she answer this question? Test your answer by asking your teenager to answer it, too.

**Humor** Opportunities to laugh together, and even to laugh at yourself, may be one of the most helpful gifts in finding the way to open the doors of communication. Look for opportunities for light heartedness and humor. Appropriately applied (this is key!), they create an atmosphere where love and openness can shine through, even if other communication feels strained. Sharing humor with children increases their comfort in the relationship and may be one of the very best ways to enhance an atmosphere of sharing.



Do you go out of your way to find humor and to share it in your family setting? Is it appropriately applied? Develop some ideas as to how you might find more levity at home if that will enhance your home atmosphere.

## Obstacles to communication

It will help to identify and examine common obstacles to communication. Once uncovered, we have something to get our arms around so that we can make the changes we desire. Dr. Thomas Gordon, who authored a program called Parent Effectiveness Training (PET), has identified 12 non-productive verbal responses that have become known as the “dirty dozen.” These responses, which are too frequently used by parents, undermine productive and positive communication. They are largely self-explanatory. Which ones are you likely to catch yourself engaging in from time to time?<sup>4</sup>

ordering	arguing	diagnosing
threatening	criticizing	sympathizing
moralizing	praising	probing
advising	ridiculing	withdrawing



Pick the two non-productive responses that you're most likely to use. How does this behavior on your part undermine good communication with your teen? Why do you suppose “praising” and “diagnosing” are on this list?

In *Raising Resilient Children*, Brooks and Goldstein identify three obstacles to communication.<sup>5</sup> They are:

- *We practice what we have lived.* We may naturally fall into the patterns of communication that we experienced as we grew up. We have to consciously work at creating the type of communication we want for our family.
- *Anger clouds effective communication.* When we're angry it's unlikely we'll listen or communicate effectively.
- *We sometimes believe that our children's goal is to wear us down.* Our teenagers are likely to test us and the limits we try to enforce. But if we take this personally rather than accept it at face value we run the risk of negatively coloring all our communication.

## Obstacles to communication (cont.)

**Filters, distractions, and more** Our list of obstacles to communication grows even longer. We have many distractions during our normal every day life; the telephone rings, the TV is on, family members and friends have needs and wants—you are most likely very adept at juggling all of these things regularly. Notice these distractions so you can deliberately eliminate them when necessary. Also, try to tune in to the more subtle forms of your communication as you make your way through the day. What does your body language say as your child converses with you? Are you facing him or engaged elsewhere? Distractions can be physical in nature (is the TV on in the background?), or they can be internal, resulting from what is going on inside of our heads.

The filters through which we gather information from the world around us come from a combination of our long term and short term mindset. Your long term mindset has been developed over time, and results from your past history, experiences, values, and upbringing. Your current mindset will be the result of recent experiences and current information. Without knowing it, you are listening through these filters; to expose them will enable you to examine whether they are enhancing or damaging your listening capabilities with your teenager.

Some common immediate filters include:<sup>6</sup>

- *Your expectations* Your expectations can create a self-fulfilling prophesy. Your child arrives home after curfew and you've been worried sick and getting angrier by the minute. If you're expecting trouble or deceit, you'll be pretty sure to find it, no matter how innocent the reason for her delayed arrival.
- *Your mood and state of mind* If you present a positive and pleasant air about you, those in your presence are likely to be affected. And you are likely to hear others in a way that is congruent with your mood.
- *Your relationship* It is hardest to be objective with those we are closest with. Parents, in particular, find it challenging to be objective. Be aware of how your lack of objectivity may hinder your ability to really listen. This becomes particularly interesting to tune in to because our adolescents are maturing all the time, and sometimes we respond to them in a way that isn't congruent with their current level of maturity.
- *Background "noise"* This can come in the form of either mental distractions or real physical distractions. The mental distractions are more likely to be affecting your ability to listen without you being aware of it. Perhaps you've had a particularly tough day at the office, or you're worried about something; this can have a big impact on your ability to listen well. Try and clear your mind, even if it's just for a few minutes, so that you can focus on giving her the attention she deserves.

## Obstacles to communication (cont.)

To give you a hand at clarifying your major obstacles to communication, here is a model that can help you tune in to the quality of your listening. In *Listening: The Forgotten Skill*, Madelyn Burley-Allen identifies three levels of listening.<sup>7</sup>

- *Level 1:* Empathetic listening is when the listener is paying attention to what is being said both verbally and non verbally. It requires the listener to suspend her own thoughts and feelings, and to pay attention only to the speaker and his communication, including his body language and expression of feelings. It is about listening from the heart.
- *Level 2:* At this level the listener hears the words but does not go deeper than that. The listening is all logical, there is little emotional connection; the focus is on content not feelings. The speaker can believe he is being heard, however, because visual cues may indicate so; however, miscommunication is not uncommon at this level.
- *Level 3:* Here, the listener is following the conversation but is really planning her response. She is not focused on listening to content or the emotions underlying the communication. Sometimes the listener makes it obvious that she is not engaged, or she may appear to be listening while her mind is really elsewhere.

Tune in to your quality of listening as you converse with your teenager. You will probably find that you engage at all three levels regularly; obviously the more time you spend listening at level one the better your communication will be.



Do this exercise for five days in a row: tune in to yourself during three conversations with your teenager each day. Identify if you're listening at level 1, 2 or 3. If you're at level 2 or 3 identify what is preventing you from listening at level 1. Try to name the filter or distraction specifically. Keep a list of the distractions or filters that interfere with your ability to listen completely to your teen.

## Strategies and techniques

We're going to examine several popular strategies for improving communication. These come from a variety of sources; some may be new to you, some may be old hat. Communication is a basic human dynamic, and yet it is one we must consciously work at to improve, whether we're at home with loved ones, in the workplace, or in any other situation with people.

### **Strategy #1: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."**<sup>8</sup>

Stephen Covey offers what, for me, is the very best advice. If you approach all communication with your teenagers from the point of view of first understanding *them*, you can avoid what usually undermines good communication. Following what is one of Covey's "habits of highly effective people" puts you in the position of *first listening*, a good place to start! It requires your attention to be placed on your child, not on yourself and your opinion. It demonstrates to your child the importance you give to her and her point of view. And it makes you slow down, allowing you time to listen and give a considered response. When faced with a disagreement, anger over misbehavior, when worried sick about a teenager who is not home at the designated time, applying this principle works wonders. And, frankly, it saves embarrassment over your own possible misbehavior.

Covey also brings to the parenting discussion another concept that has outstanding applications when considering communication with teenagers. Covey speaks about what he calls the "emotional bank account."<sup>9</sup> The emotional bank account is the amount of trust that has built up between two people. I "make deposits" into my daughter's emotional bank account by expressing thoughtfulness, kindness, courtesy, honesty, etc. I "make withdrawals" from her account by overreacting, treating her with disrespect, ignoring her, betraying her trust.

Let's think about how to apply this in every day life. The parents who have ample opportunity to spend time with their kids doing fun things, sharing sports, or other activities, are making deposits by sharing experiences and by being tuned in. Parents who have kids who are involved in many activities away from home, or who prefer spending time behind their

Don't insist, "It's time to have a serious talk." Talk to me about serious things but don't make a Big Deal about it.<sup>10</sup>



*Sam, 17*

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## Strategies and techniques (cont.)

closed doors, will have to work extra hard, and it is for them that this concept is so important. When given a few short minutes to communicate with your teenager, it is best if those few short minutes aren't just spent harping on her about chores, homework, etc. When communication is limited to the withdrawal side of the account, it takes a toll. Overdrafts have serious consequences in a relationship. Being conscious about your deposits makes you focus on positives in your relationship with your teen; the benefits of which are invaluable. Raising the concept of the emotional bank account to your *conscious* level, so you can be *intentional* about making deposits, may be all it takes to improve communication between you and your teenager.

### Strategy #2: Active Listening

Do you know someone who makes you feel as though you've truly been *listened to*? It's a special feeling when you are heard, and it has inherent value and tremendous power.

Many times in conversations, others are thinking about their response rather than what you are saying. You probably do it to others unconsciously, from time to time. Active listening is a discipline that can be applied in many settings, certainly not just with our children. You may have been exposed to this concept in the workplace, or in working with a professional counselor or therapist. Although it may not have been named, this "language of acceptance" is widely used and easily learned.

Active listening can open doors in your communication with your teenager because its premise is that the listener offers no judgment, only an honest intent to truly hear what is being said. It requires you to monitor the filters that impede good communication. Your filters can take many forms: preconceptions, expectations, opinions, and more. Active listening will help you tune in to and possibly "turn off" the filters that are in effect during conversations with your teenager. Active listening also requires you to become conscious of the non-verbal communication that is taking place; notice the tone of voice and body language. What does it mean? What is your child saying non-verbally?

The objective in active listening is to get into the shoes of your child, to completely understand what she is saying *from her vantage point*. In order to do this, you must suspend judgment and be completely open and able to show empathy for her. It is essential to listen both for *content* (what is being said) and *intent* (what is "between the lines" and what is not being said).

## Strategies and techniques (cont.)

Here are five techniques<sup>11</sup> that you can apply to your active listening strategy. Become conscious of times that you can appropriately apply them and gently try it. Active listening can become a habit and will enhance your communication with your teenager.

Technique	Examples
<b>Reflect / Paraphrase</b>	Rephrase by using your own words to confirm your understanding of what has been said.
<b>Perception Check</b>	Deepen your ability to provide support and empathy by checking out your own belief about what your child feels or thinks.
<b>Summarize</b>	Pull the important facts, thoughts, or ideas together.
<b>Open-Ended Questions</b>	Probe for further information by asking questions that require more than a yes or no answer.
<b>Body Language</b>	Increase the comfort level for your child by consciously using your body (eyes, torso, arms) in a way that is congruent with your words.

Teen: *"Mom, you never let me do anything!"*

Parent: *"You're upset with me because you think I don't give you enough freedom."*

Teen: *"I'm not a little kid anymore! You can't control my life!"*

Parent: *"It sounds like you think I'm trying to keep too much control over you. Is that the way you feel?"*

*"Let me make sure I understand what it is you're asking. You want to go to Tom's house and spend the night, but his parents are not going to be there. Help me understand why you feel this will work and be safe."*

*"How important is this to you?"  
"What do you want to happen?"  
"What are you thinking of doing about it?"*

- Use eye contact
- Lean forward
- Open your stance
- Nod understanding

**Strategies and techniques (cont.)**

**Please Don't Say Anything,  
Just Listen**

**Listen**

When I ask you to listen to me,  
And you start giving me advice  
You have not done what I asked.  
When I ask you to listen to me,  
And you begin to tell me why I  
shouldn't feel that way,  
You are trampling on my feelings.  
When I ask you to listen to me,  
And you feel you have to do  
something to solve my problems,  
You have failed me, strange  
as that may seem.

Listen: All that I ask is that you listen,  
Not talk or do - just hear me.  
When you do something for me  
That I need to do for myself,  
you contribute to my fear  
and to my feelings of inadequacy.  
But when you accept as a simple fact  
That I do what I feel,  
no matter how irrational,  
Then I can quit trying to  
convince you  
And go about the business  
Of understanding what's behind  
my feelings.  
So please listen and just hear me.

And if you want to talk,  
Wait a minute for your turn -  
and I'll listen to you.

- Anonymous

## Strategies and techniques (cont.)

### Strategy #3: “The Relationship Approach”

This point of view is based on a book called *Parent/Teen Breakthrough: The Relationship Approach*, by Mira Kirshenbaum. Its point is simple, and it merits discussion.

The principle is simply this: “Work only at improving your relationship with your teenager. If you think something will improve your relationship, do it; if not, don’t”.<sup>12</sup> Some people refer to this as “relational parenting.”

Our “control” over our teenagers is an illusion, and a negative one that undermines their development. Kirshenbaum promotes the concept that if we continue to “manage” the lives of our teenagers, we are delaying their ability to become self-reliant, which is the end result that we all desire. In order to develop their own identity they need to take risks, experiment, and learn who they are. So parents trying to gain control create the problem, not the solution, and they even exacerbate the problem by creating resistance, which creates more problems.

When you focus your attention on the *quality* of your relationship, you focus on the ways you can provide a positive influence and create an atmosphere of sharing, trust, and open communication while giving the teenager the control and the responsibility for themselves that allows them to grow independent. Kirshenbaum writes, “Your relationship with your teenager is the only thing you have control over, and there it is, in your face every day. You can evaluate it, assess it, influence it, and see how it is, every day.”<sup>13</sup>

Relationship Approach Principles:

- Ask questions; use active listening.
- Say how you feel using “I” sentences.
- Ask for what you want directly and specifically.
- Expect to negotiate; you will work out solutions together.
- Provide information; it is the basis on which your teen will make good decisions.
- Ask permission when you want to provide parental advice.
- Don’t make rules. Make agreements.

Whether or not this approach feels right to you, you can likely see some merit in it. And it certainly puts our focus on an important place—our relationship. It’s worthy of some serious thought.

**Strategies and techniques (cont.)****E**

Here is an example of the relationship approach in action. Your 15-year-old wants to stay out way past her curfew for a special party.

Using the relationship approach you:

- 1) **Ask questions and get more information.** *“What’s happening that is making this party go so late?”* (When you know more about the situation, you can understand each other better.)
- 2) **Say how you feel.** *“I feel that is awfully late for you. I’m feeling that you’re growing up too fast.”* (When you share your feelings it makes your teen understand you better, get closer to you as you behave more like a human being and less like a parent.)
- 3) **Ask for what you want directly.** *“It would really mean a lot to me if you would come home by midnight. Would you do that for me?”* (You are not pulling rank, but are treating your kid with respect.)
- 4) **You can try to work out a solution together.** *“One a.m. seems really late; let’s see if we can agree on a time that would feel fair to both of us.”* (When people solve problems together, they feel better about each other.)

Mira Kirshenbaum and Charles Foster, *Parent/Teen Breakthrough: The Relationship Approach*, 77



What are the merits of the “relationship approach?” What would change in your behavior if you were to actively employ this strategy?

**Strategies and techniques (cont.)**



Notice 3 conversations with your teenager this week. Tune into your emotional filters or distractions that are activated at the time. Identify them and write them down. How did they influence your communication?

Think of a conversation you had with your teen that did not go well. Using one of the strategies discussed in this session, outline a better way to have this conversation.

## Strategies and techniques (cont.)

As a student of human behavior, I find it interesting to apply lessons and observations from one part of my life to another. For instance, there are times I learn something in a business environment that has applications at home and vice-versa—certainly you have the same experience from your various roles. It's great to share those observations with our teenagers for many reasons, one of which is that it helps to bring your world alive to them. Here is a useful piece of information gained in a recent organizational development workshop that has tremendous relevance to our discussion of communication with teenagers:

### E

A business colleague who specializes in organizational development has expertise facilitating conversations that deal with communication breakdowns. This is a tricky kind of conversation to handle with your teenager, but as you may have occasion to use this, there is merit in examining the strategies that can improve your chances of success.

When trying to understand why there is a breakdown between you and your teenager, examine *trust* closely. Trust is made up of three elements:

- sincerity
- reliability
- competence

If trust is the issue, ask yourself these questions:

- Is the breakdown due to a lack of sincerity? On whose part?
- Is it due to a lack of reliability? How might that be addressed?
- Is it resulting from a lack of competence? Does your teenager have the knowledge, experience, and skills necessary for the situation? The two of you may not agree on the assessment of competence, but identifying what experience, skills, and knowledge are at issue, and evaluating them in a conversation, may lead to greater understanding, respect, and ultimately, trust.

Trust is a big issue between parents and teenagers and you may be able to get a better handle on correcting what's wrong if you can more closely identify the underlying cause.

Another useful insight that can be applied to a breakdown with a teenager is to examine the types of **responses** you have as options. When there is a communication breakdown you can respond in one of two ways:

- with an emotional response, or
- with a problem-solving response.

There are times when both may feel appropriate, but it will help to understand what is at stake when you make your choice. To respond emotionally satisfies a need that you may have, but it probably won't positively influence your teen's position and may shut him down. If you begin with an emotional response, you will probably not get to the problem-solving conversation at the same time; you will have to come back later to accomplish that—if the damage done from the emotional response is not irreparable. But if you begin problem solving, there is room to express your emotions at the end of the conversation—and you may find that your need to express those emotions has diminished greatly after you've discussed how to solve the problem.

Source: Thomas C. Matera<sup>14</sup>

## Strategies and techniques (cont.)

**Intuition - recognize the important role it plays** In our culture, intuition frequently isn't regarded with much respect. But in the area of parenting, it is an essential tool. We read our family members by observing their body language, their tone of voice, their words, and by our intuition. It is our "sixth sense," and I urge you to bring it above ground and enhance your intuitive capabilities consciously. Tuned in parents already recognize the value of intuition; how many times have you had a conversation with the pediatrician telling her, "I know that she has an infection, even if the test results are negative." And you're right, most of the time.

There are numerous ways to enhance this important sense, and there are some wonderful books, tapes, and Web sites on the subject. One of my favorite books is Belleruth Naparstek's *Your Sixth Sense*. Also, Lynn Robinson also has done some interesting work and written several books on intuition; visit her website at [www.LynnRobinson.com](http://www.LynnRobinson.com).

For another fascinating discussion of this topic, visit Robert K. Cooper's book, *The Other 90%*. In it he describes the *three brains* humans are endowed with: in the gut, in the heart, and in the head. He claims the neurological networks of the heart and gut respond more quickly to experiences than the brain in the head. When you over-rely on your head, you're setting yourself up for extra struggles because you're working without being balanced by the gut and the heart. He encourages human beings to consciously tune in to the perceptions and impressions of all three of our brains, because that is the way we become fully informed.<sup>15</sup>



*Stephen, 15*

Hey, Mom, you seem to think I should tell you everything that's happening in my life. I won't, ever. Get over it. Believe me, if I absolutely need to tell you you'll be the first to know.<sup>16</sup>

## Negotiation and setting limits

Any discussion between parents of teenagers will get around to discipline, control, and negotiating the setting of limits. This is dicey turf for many of us. Parents who are completely comfortable with their stand, and who don't revisit it regularly, worry me. Although I envy their confidence, the reality is the ground is constantly shifting as our kids get older, and it's important to be letting out the rein—gradually and with consideration. Both flexibility and firmness are important; parents who maintain an inappropriate level of control are handicapping their kids from important learning opportunities. On the other hand, those who take the easy way out apply little or no control (many parents fall into this category), and that is at least equally harmful.

Nobody said parenting was easy!

### E

Throughout a person's growth, infancy through adulthood, structure and limits need to evolve to reflect each developmental stage. For instance, you wouldn't negotiate with a one-year-old about bedtime. Nor would you insist that your seventeen-year-old be in bed by 9:00 pm. every night. These are not developmentally appropriate limits. Ideally, limits and structure form the foundation of the stable platform that adolescents use to launch themselves into adulthood. Realize that these rules include not only the actual guideline, but also the consistent enforcement and follow-through. Consistency between words and action is crucial, because no matter what you say about limits, it is what you do that truly matters. . . . In fact, consistency is so important that in some instances consistent "bad" parenting is better than extreme inconsistency between "bad" and "good" parenting.

Michael Riera, *Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers*, 73-74

Important things to remember when setting rules:

- Words are important, but there is no substitute for action—your *behavior* is what carries the most weight.
- Problems arise when kids get mixed or muddled messages from their parents. Sometimes they are looking for limits and they are given more space. Parents need to be very sensitive to not give mixed messages and be consistent, clear, and appropriate.
- When you set rules, make sure they are in sync with your values and that you are willing, and able, to enforce them.
- It is appropriate to negotiate with teenagers.
- Rules should be clear and clearly stated; however, there are times it may make more sense to enforce them in spirit than to the exact letter.

## Negotiation and setting limits (cont.)

Wolf explains that parents can empower themselves by recognizing that adolescents may sometimes obey the intent, or spirit, of the rules even if they choose not to obey them to the letter. This means that parents' rules are, in fact, working.<sup>17</sup>

**Why negotiate?** It's important to recognize that it is through negotiation kids learn to develop autonomy and to take responsibility for themselves. Gradually they have more say, more input on decisions that affect them. This is appropriate and an important part of their developmental process.

At some point, many parents face a certain amount of sneaking around on the part of their teenagers as they begin to test limits. Riera maintains that parents often head in one of two directions: becoming over-rigid or over-flexible. Over-rigid parents expect the trash to be taken out at the moment the parent says so. Over-flexible parents may never mention the garbage at all, but instead take it out themselves thinking that it is not worth arguing over anyway. Riera suggests that both are "equally disastrous to the adolescent's development" as they are maturing and learning to accept responsibility. According to Riera, kids need to be able to negotiate and take stands responsibly. This process should be important to parents because "the negotiated limits and structure are your greatest sources of accurate feedback about your teenager's current level of maturity."<sup>18</sup>

Another reason why it is important to include teens up front in negotiation and decision making is because if you don't, they may agree to anything just to get the conversation over with. If kids know they have no influence over a decision, you may actually be setting them up for a rule infraction or lie. Everyone is likely to be happier and safer with clear negotiation and communication up front.



How do you negotiate in your house? Do you allow your teenager to have input into the rules and limits? How do you enforce them? Are you consistent? Does your teenager know what to expect from you and your spouse?

## Negotiation and setting limits (cont.)

**Natural consequences** If your teenager elects not to spend time studying for her Spanish test, the natural consequence might be that she doesn't do well on the exam. If she stays up until the wee hours of the morning at a friend's sleep-over, she may be too tired to function well the next day. A parent does not have to enforce any punishment in those cases, perhaps; there are natural consequences that will take place on their own.

Once your adolescent is well into his teen years, natural consequences may be the best kind of influence that you have. The benefit of this is that it takes the parent out of the position of "enforcer" of rules and puts the responsibility directly on the teenager's shoulders. The reality is, anyway, as your child gets older, parents have less and less direct control, and the teenager knows it. By relying on natural consequences you are allowing him to accept responsibility for his actions and non-actions, and you are simply supporting the law of cause and effect.<sup>19</sup>

### E

The essence of firm strong parenting is the ability to make rules, unpopular though they may be, and keep them in place, regardless of the reaction that such rules may provoke. Now that the rule is firmly in place, the next step is up to the teenager.

Anthony Wolf, *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?*, 95



What examples can you think of from your adolescence when the lessons you learned came from natural consequences? Did these lessons have a lasting value? How might you apply this to your teenager?

## Negotiation and setting limits (cont.)

**Lying** Unfortunately, lying is something parents of teenagers may face. It's not one of the behaviors that tends to endear teens to their parents; however to gain some understanding on the issue can arm you and help you prepare your response.

According to Ava Siegler (*The Essential Guide to the New Adolescence*), teenagers lie when they feel there is no room to tell the truth, or when the truth would be totally unacceptable to their parents. She claims that lies tend to fall into two categories:

- *defensive lies* which are intended to protect their newly formed sense of self, to protect their privacy and secrets and to protect others: "I don't know who was smoking in the driveway."
- *inflating lies* which are intended to promote their status in the community: "My boyfriend gave me this bracelet."<sup>20</sup>

Wolf suggests that parents focus on the situation that the teen lied about and deal with the situation, rather than focus on the lie itself.

**Help your teenagers comply** Some experts emphasize that it may be helpful to brainstorm with your teenager to help him develop strategies to live within the boundaries you've established. It's one thing to "lay down the law", but if, realistically, it will be difficult for him to live within these boundaries, you will both benefit by discussing openly the nature of the disagreement. This dialogue will also help you to better understand what is happening in his world, and helping him figure out ways to live within your rule system can go a long way toward ensuring that will happen.

**The bottom line** For parents, the bottom line is to find a place of balance—where you are gradually giving over responsibility and the natural consequences for that responsibility, to the teenager. Negotiating your way through this growth process is unlikely to be elegant or without stress. That's when it becomes the most important to be thoughtful about your position, your stance. It is a strong parent who is willing to examine her position, to accept input, and make changes when appropriate.

Several experts refer to the concept of setting your sights for "the north star," for only by knowing your ultimate objectives and goals will you be equipped to manage the storms along the way. Sometimes the storms are violent and the currents strong; it is your strength and ability to focus on your destination and goals that will keep you on course.

Natural consequences apply to parents as well as teenagers. Parents will learn from the actions that we take; we will learn what works and what doesn't. As we examine this ever-changing, ever-developing relationship we can apply what we learn, and get better as we grow.

## Negotiation and setting limits (cont.)

Parents won't be perfect. What's important is that we do our very best, and continually strive to learn and be better. Remember Level Four parenting in Session 2? We're learning and growing too. And we're guaranteed to make mistakes. I heard one parenting education expert say that if parents "did it right" 40% of the time we're doing well!

One of the most important things for parents to remember is to approach this "job" with a positive attitude, and to assume a firm, but upbeat manner. If teenagers can push their parents around, the results can be harmful for the very people we are trying to protect—the teens themselves. Wolf talks about "bullying," the tactic that teens may employ when trying to push their parents into submission. While he points out that "being a strong parent does not mean that one cannot reverse a decision"<sup>21</sup>, it does mean that parents shouldn't cave in to bullying.

### E

Children of parents who cannot be bullied will also argue, and they too will push—but not nearly so hard, because they have learned that it won't work with their parents. How does a child know whether a change resulted from her bullying or from a parent's independent decision? In any given instance she may not. But over time, over repeated instances, children learn whether theirs are parents who make decisions based on what they think is best or on what they think their children will accept without a tantrum.

Anthony Wolf, *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?*, 63-64

## **Communication: sharing ideas**

We parents have been having conversations about our kids, and sharing techniques that work since our kids were born. And thank heavens for the sharing, because it is one of the best ways we gain information and insight! Let me share a few ideas that others have generously shared with me:

- The following technique was used by one friend of mine when direct communication was just too uncomfortable for her daughter. The mom ended up writing down what she needed to say in a spiral notebook and left it for her daughter to read. Her daughter spontaneously wrote a reply, in the same notebook, and left it for her mom to read. They used this notebook for some personal and important communication, conversations that were just too touchy for the daughter to have directly. They ended up using the same notebook for these personal conversations over several years, yet they never actually mentioned them in conversation. The technique was satisfactory to both of them, however, and allowed them to cover some sensitive ground.
- One family friend has a technique that helps to ease the family into dinner table conversation: each person takes a turn telling three things that happened to them that day.



Share one “best practice” with your group that you use (or have heard of) to enhance communication in your home.



## ISSUES TO EXAMINE AND DISCUSS

	<u>Refer to</u>
1. Take another look at your personal guidelines for communication. Share with another person why remembering these guidelines will be important to you.	75
2. What did you learn by doing the exercises on page 88? What filters did you identify that affected your conversations? How can you diminish the effect these filters have on your communication?	79-88
3. Which of the communication strategies discussed feels more appropriate to try with your teen? Pick one that resonates with you, and commit to putting it into practice this week.	82-90
4. What is your reaction to the concept of “relational parenting”? Discuss.	86-87
5. Do you agree with the three components of trust? How might you use this information?	89
6. How has your intuition helped you? Can you learn to use it consciously? How?	90
7. How do you handle rule infractions at your house? What is your response to the inevitable testing of limits?	
8. Examine the difference between natural consequences and punishment (e.g. grounding your teenager). Think of examples of when each might be appropriate.	
9. Share with a friend or your group, if you have one, some ideas for improving communication with your teenagers. Be sure to write down the ideas you may want to use at home!	
10. What do you think of the opening scenario?	71



Clearly there are additional topics to cover in topic area of communication, such as internet communication, etc...and you'll find this material on the website. You'll even find a self-guided course you may take in the articles area. If you are an educator, you'll also find materials of interest in the “Parent Involvement” section, as improving communication between parents and secondary schools is an area of focus for us.



**TAKE-AWAYS**

What are my “take-aways” from this chapter?

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What specific things am I going to do differently as a result of what I've learned?

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