# How To Resolve Conflicts With Your Teen

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*As the parent of a teenager, you can't avoid conflict. But you can use strategies to manage conflicts-and these strategies may even help your child learn important life skills.*

*"Please clean your room today," says Riya's mother.*

*"I'll do it later," says Riya.*

*"Do it now and get over with it."*

*"Why should I? I am too tired today and I can't do it."*

*"Well, fine then, I won't let you sleep at your friend's place this weekend."*

*"You just didn't say that, Mom."*

*"Well, I did. You never do what I ask of you."*

*"You are always bossing me around!"*

*"If you just do what I ask, we needn't argue."*

*"And Mom, if you would just stop telling me what to do, I wouldn't be arguing either."*

*"The longer you take to listen and do as I say, please know that you are not going."*

*"Do you realise, Mom, that the more you tell me to do it, the more I don't feel like doing it?"*

If you are the parent of a teenager, you must be familiar with this kind of conflict. And you've probably wondered, "Why can't we get along?" Conflicts between parents and teenagers-though a normal part of life-can be stressful to both you and your teen. When you try to advise your teenage children, they often find it irritating, intrusive or critical. And when they don't listen to you, you lose your cool. Finding a reasonable and neutral solution that is acceptable to both becomes difficult, and the stage is set for more conflicts.

### Understanding the Teen Brain

To understand why conflicts occur between you and your teenager, it's important to understand the teenage brain and the changes it undergoes. Dr Dan Siegal, author of ' Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain,' suggests that during adolescence, the limbic area of the nervous system-the system responsible for feelings-exerts much more influence on the brain areas responsible for higher-level reasoning, than in children or adults. This results in increased emotionality, that is, intense emotional responses that make a teen more easily irritated, upset, and moody.

Moreover, in adolescence, the brain starts to focus on the positive, thrilling aspect of a choice and minimise the negative, dangerous aspects. This makes adolescents more likely to engage in risky behaviour. The teen's increased emotionality combined with high risk-taking behaviour often becomes a factor in parent-teen conflict.

But conflict provides an opportunity for enhanced understanding and a stronger relationship with your teen.

### How to Resolve Conflicts with Your Teen

Pause and think. When you are caught in a conflict with your teen, don't try to get rid of your distress quickly. Instead, focus on your thoughts and feelings. Try to become a mute spectator and watch what's happening within you and around you. Slowly, bring your mind back to your breathing. Remind yourself that these are fleeting thoughts and emotions-and that this, too, shall pass. Sometimes, just inhaling a few deep breaths, holding them for a few seconds and then exhaling will help you calm down.

Allow yourself to cool down. Often, in an argument, our emotions can overwhelm our better judgment. When an argument with your teenager is escalating into a power struggle, walk away. But before leaving, acknowledge to your teen that you're walking away because things are going out of control and that you're willing to address the issue after you have cooled down. Delaying a talk doesn't mean that you are 'giving up' or 'giving in'. It only means that you'll discuss the matter with your teen when emotions are not getting the better of you, and you can look at a situation more reasonably. This is a good way to teach your teen how to manage strong emotions-a skill that will come handy in the future.

Do not personalise. It's only natural to feel extremely hurt or angry at what your teen may have said because she was hurting equally. However, don't hold grudges or give your teenage daughter a cold shoulder. Nor should you subject yourself to her silent treatment. If you find yourself being overly critical or passing snide remarks, understand that you still have unresolved feelings. Acknowledge them, keep a check on yourself and address them. Similarly, engage with your teen when you feel ready. However, if she continues to give you the silent treatment, ignore it and go about your business, only to connect with her later.

Give your teen some space. It's best not to expect your teen to immediately agree with your arguments or validate your feelings. Your teenager is also left with feelings of hurt and anger in the aftermath of a conflict. It's quite possible that your teen couldn't convey what he wanted to, and is, therefore, feeling frustrated. Venting his anger on you may be your teen's way of releasing his distress and all the pent-up emotions he was holding in for long. Whatever the reason, allow him to decide when he's ready to talk with you, instead of inducing a sense of shame and guilt in him.

Use 'I' statements. Often, you may find yourself placing the blame or responsibility on your teen. You may think that the conflict is your teen's doing-and that you have little control over the outcome. For instance, in an argument with your teen, you probably say things like "You never listen to me" or "You are so careless!" This approach will invite resistance more than co-operation from her.

Instead of using "you", start using "I". Using "I" statements shows you're taking responsibility for your feelings. And that you're not accusing and attacking her. For example, avoid saying, "You are always late and you make me so mad." Instead, say, "I noticed the time you got back home. It was later than the agreed time. It makes me upset." What you need to do is target the behavior, not your teen.

Address one issue at a time. Stick to one issue at a time rather than focusing on past transgressions. This means you focus on the issue that started the argument, instead of complaining about ten other things your teen did that annoyed or hurt you. For example, if you're arguing with your teen over his bedtime, avoid saying other things like "You always play loud music and never care about others' feelings." Always try to solve problems one at a time.

Specify the behavior you want. One of the best ways to avoid unnecessary conflicts is to describe the changes you'd like your teen to make-be specific about what action should stop and what should start. Ensure that the changes you are requesting are reasonable. For example, you can tell your teen, "Can you start doing your homework at 7 PM and not 9 PM?" or "Instead of pushing him away, play with your little brother for some time in your free time." When you specify your needs and wants, your teen is more likely to act responsibly. And last but not least, don't forget to praise your teen when she performs the desired behaviors.

Own your actions. During conflicts with teens, we're so hung up on blaming the other person that our vision gets narrowed. You only see the teen's opposition, not his perspective. The need here is to reflect on your own behavior. By taking responsibility for your own behavior and showing that you understand your teen's feelings, you are leading the way to change. Dr Joanne Stern, author of 'Parenting is a Contact Sport: 8 Ways to Stay Connected to Your Kids for Life', says you can tell your teen: "I know this has been a rough one, and I'm sorry about that. I know that we're both in the middle of our feelings right now, but I want you to know that I love you and as soon as you feel better, I'm ready to do something fun or talk through this."

Communicate with empathy. A powerful way to connect with your teen is to empathize with her feelings. Conflict is best managed when your teen feels heard. When you say, "Can you tell me how this situation makes you feel?", you set the stage for conflict resolution, not confrontation. A well-intended and sensitive approach will make your teen think, "Mom seems to have understood what I was saying, she really gets me." This will help your teen know she's not alone-and she'll feel more accepted, valued and supported.

### Handling Teen Threats

According to Carl E Pickhardt, author of 'Stop the Screaming', sometimes your teen may threaten you with extreme action and dire consequences like-"I'll run away" or "I'll stop going to school/college." Your teen uses this strategy to provoke you, get you to respond. You can say, "These don't sound like very helpful or happy decisions to make, and you would perhaps regret making them. But the decision we made that you would not sleep at your friend's place after the college party is firm."

### Repairing the Relationship after a Conflict with Your Teen

Maintain Boundaries. On the days when there are no arguments with your teen, try to talk about the challenges of the teenage years with your teen. For example, you can say, "You're at an age where you may have your own views and we may disagree on many things, but that's expected and normal. Both of us may feel angry and upset, which is normal too." It's a good idea to involve your teen in discussions about rule-setting and let him have a say in deciding the consequences.

Model the behaviors you want your teenager to learn. In your conflict with your spouse or the neighbor, model behaviors you would want your teen to develop. If she sees you being forceful and demanding-or meek and submissive-while resolving a conflict, she's likely to do the same. Your teen's more likely to be influenced by what you do rather than what you say or how you react.

Your teen needs to know that conflicts can be resolved. For example, you can tell her, "There is no concern or disagreement that cannot be discussed and worked out, even though it may not be pleasant or to your satisfaction." Teach your teen to manage her emotions through emotion coaching. This will help her to weigh options, consider possible outcomes and make a decision on any matter while keeping her emotions in check.

Don't dismiss feelings. Parents who find it difficult to discuss conflicts often say, "I don't want to discuss it." Say your teen wants to discuss with you how a teacher's remark about his academic performance has upset him. You may minimize or dismiss his feelings by saying he's being quite "emotional" and "sensitive" or that he need not read too much into the statement. Truth be told, you may have difficulty connecting with your teen due to your inability to deal with vulnerability. Hence, it becomes easier to dismiss their emotions by calling them "too sensitive" or "too dramatic". By saying such things, you're not really helping your teen address his problem. Instead of invalidating your teen's feelings, try to love and support your teen without judgment.

Be available. Suppose your daughter has had a hard day at school and is unwilling to speak about it-and you want to know what's going on. When she doesn't answer, you get impatient and say, "Why can't you just tell me?" This kind of an angry demand will only make her defensive and resent you, and she may withdraw. A more helpful approach would be to say to her, "How can I help you feel better if I don't know what's worrying you?" In this manner, you are inviting your teenager to initiate a conversation and share her feelings.

### In a nutshell

* Conflict in relationships is normal and this is an important message to be communicated to your teen
* Parents can help their teens develop good conflict resolution skills
* Target the behavior and not your teen
* Focus on facts and address one issue at a time
* Communicate with empathy

### What you can do right away

* When you feel your anger rise as you interact with your teen, step back, pause, take a deep breath or do whatever it takes to get your anger under control. Once you have regulated your emotions, talk to your teen
* Before you have a fruitful conversation, make sure your teen is in a better mood
* Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements
* If you occasionally react in anger to your teen's behavior, remember it's only natural. In such situations, it's always a good idea to apologise to your teen at a later time, when you're both calm. This helps repair the relationship