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The Truth About Ticked-off Teens

How to get through to your angry adolescent.

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by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor

Let me guess: Your teenager is angry. If she's not now, then she was yesterday. Or maybe she'll be fuming tomorrow. She's angry at you, her BFF, her math teacher, the entire world. You have no idea why--and to make matters worse, every attempt at communication is met with crying, screaming or some other intense emotional outburst. Nothing you say or do seems to help. You are convinced she speaks some other language, and she knows for a fact that you're speaking a foreign tongue.



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That's because--in some ways--teens and adults do speak different languages, says Ajit Jetmalani, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, Ore. Blame it on the brain. Teenagers process, respond and react differently than their parents because of the way they're wired.

"Adolescents depend mostly on the [brain's] limbic system ... to regulate emotions," Jetmalani says. "Adults are using the frontal lobes."

We'll spare you further details on cranial anatomy, and go straight to the practical tips that can help you communicate more effectively with the surly teens in your home.

From a Teen's-Eye View

First, it's important to at least try to understand what provokes anger in the 13- to 18-year-old set (although--trust us--we realize it is nearly impossible to completely "get" teenagers). Shawn Crombie, M.D., a child psychiatrist with Legacy Emmanuel Children's Hospital in Portland, Ore., says there are three general categories when it comes to teen anger: obsessing over past events, anxiety about future events and--you guessed it--hormones.

But it goes beyond that. For teens, social expectations are changing. They want more independence but haven't developed the skills to manage all the challenges that come along with that independence, Crombie explains. For adults, anger might not seem like the appropriate response to those situations, but for a teen it might be the only way he or she can express powerful emotions.

How do you know if your teen is angry? It depends on the individual. Some express rage by yelling and screaming. Others alienate themselves and engage in rebellious behavior (like the classic James Dean character). Silence and frequent scowling can indicate anger, as can back-talking and general irritability.

"Every kid is different," explains Jetmalani. "What you are looking for is a change in behavior."

In other words, if your happy, affectionate, sweet teen daughter suddenly starts slamming doors and using foul language, you may have an angry girl on your hands. And while her behavior might be totally out of line, it won't do you an ounce of good to raise your voice and bark orders. If you want to get through to her, you're going to have to use a communication method that makes sense to her (and, no, this does not mean giving up parental control).

Learn to Speak Teen

It all starts with the right approach, Crombie says. If your teen is super angry right now, it probably isn't the best time for a chat. Crombie suggests waiting until he or she is calm before attempting to start a conversation. And when the time is right, don't make demands--simply ask, and do so in a calm manner.

"The goal is to get them to stop what they are doing and sit down ... it's more of an invitation than a command," he says, adding that it works best when lunch or a snack is involved.

Once you have your teen's full attention, it's time to do some talking (note: this doesn't mean giving a lecture on bad grades or disrespectful attitudes).

Crombie suggests starting the conversation with one very basic question: "What's up?"

This works, he says, because you are using their terminology. Teens are more likely to give at least some sort of answer when the question makes sense to them.

When they do respond, pay close attention to their body language and the number of words they use. Then, respond back to them in a similar manner.

For example, if your teen answers your "what's up?" question with two words, give two words in return. If he or she gives you three sentences, give three sentences back, and so forth. Whatever you do, don't try too hard to speak in "the crazy slang these kids are using." It will make you look silly, and worse, your teens might think you're mocking them.

Also, try to avoid rigid phrases such as "I need," "you must" and "we always."

"Rigidity isn't accepted very well," Crombie says. "Adolescents pick up real quick when you are not there to work with them, but rather to impose on them."

Other tips include: stay seated during the conversation, use neutral posture and, most importantly, avoid yelling—even if your teen starts yelling at you.

As the parent, it is also important to keep the goal of the conversation in mind:

- Are you just trying to find out how school is going? Start by sharing a little bit about your life at work.
- Do you need some help around the house? Give them one project to start with, rather than a whole laundry list.
- Do you want to make sure they aren't driving recklessly? Offer a concrete example as to how this could hurt them, rather than a mini-lesson on the high cost of car insurance (they probably don't understand insurance and money issues, but they do understand that spending months in the hospital recovering from a car accident is not fun).

Do these methods always work? Well, they often do. But there is always the exception to the rule. If your teen doesn't respond to your thoughtful communication tactics, and the anger continues to increase, it might be time to investigate the possibility that something more serious is happening.

Depression can trigger anger, as can certain mental illnesses, severe stress and substance abuse, Crombie says. If you suspect one of these more serious problems (clues include changes in sleep or eating patterns, a drop in grades and peer group problems), it is time to seek professional help. Crombie suggests starting with your teen's pediatrician or a school counselor to get an assessment of the problem and a recommendation for where to go for help.

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