

COMMUNICATION FOR COOPERATION

for parents of teens
and tweens



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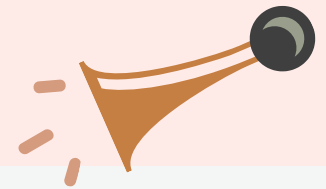
Speaking
of
Teens

Laying the Groundwork

6 PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEEN TO ENGAGE THEIR COOPERATION

Before getting into the nitty gritty of the dos and don'ts to get your teen to cooperate with you, we need to discuss some overarching principles. Keep all of these in mind if you want to avoid arguments, grumbling, and being ignored. The goal is to get them to cooperate while maintaining your connection to them (and your influence in their life).

#1 Pay attention to your "triggers"



We can't talk about any interaction between parents and teenagers without discussing emotion (both ours and our teen's). If we want to gain our teen's cooperation, we must learn to regulate our emotions – manage our anger, frustration, annoyance, etc.

But first, we must acknowledge these emotions and where they come from. Generally, they're all based in fear. For example, fear that our teen is or will become a slob, unmotivated, unambitious, fail a class, not get into college, live in the basement forever, etc.

These negative thoughts loom in the back of your mind and influence how we react to our teens and tweens. As Tina Payne Bryson and Dan Siegel describe this in their book, *No Drama Discipline*, it's as if these negative thoughts trigger the Jaws theme music (da dum, da dum, da dum...) in our head, which then colors the way we interpret and react to certain things they do.

This "shark music" is made up all sorts of stuff from our distant or recent past and it causes us to think irrationally, negatively, or worry about certain things our teen does. It sabotages our interactions, dooming them from the start by fueling our own fear.

For example, our shark music can come from our own childhood and adolescent experiences, how we were raised, experiences with boyfriends or girlfriends, things we saw siblings, parents and friends go through, what we dealt with at school, what we've gone through with our teen's siblings or with our teen before this moment, and on and on.

So, pay attention to your shark music. What issues do you get really riled up about? Do you overreact to certain things they do or don't do? Are these things really mission critical? Practice mindfulness, start journaling for clarity, but whatever you do, don't let your negative emotions rule your interactions with your child.

#2 Be mindful of the changes going on in your teen's brain



When our kid hits puberty their brain goes a little haywire (did I really have to tell you that?)!

The amygdala is the part of the brain responsible for detecting threats in the environment and it triggers the fight, flight or freeze response in the brain and body when a threat is detected. This response floods the brain and body with stress chemicals like cortisol and causes an automatic reaction (like when we sense something coming towards our face and we put our hand up).

During adolescence, the amygdala is super sensitive and detects threats *where there are none*. So, teens respond in anger, frustration, fear, by being nervous, etc. or by just completely shutting down over things that seem totally irrational, silly, or make no sense to us.

On top of that, the reward system, which is responsible for motivating and reinforcing pleasurable experiences is also in hyperdrive during adolescence (from around age 10 to the mid-20s). This is why it's so hard to get them off the game console or social media.

To top it off, during adolescence, the brain is in the process of strengthening and pruning extra synaptic connections in the prefrontal cortex. This part of the brain is responsible for executive functions like problem solving, focus, making good decisions and using self-control. And while the prefrontal cortex is undergoing these changes, an adolescent's ability to use these functions is significantly impaired.

Of course, all kids are different and these changes occurring in the brain will impact each of them in a unique way. Factors like genetics, environment, parenting, temperament, stress, and various life experiences, will play a role in how these neurobiological changes influence their thoughts, emotions and behavior.

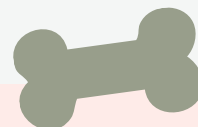
The bottom line is, our teens and tweens are at the mercy of their changing brain and we must understand, be empathetic, and help guide their behavior rather than blaming or punishing them.



#3 Focus on autonomy rather than "obedience"

Beginning in about the 8th grade, we start to notice our kids not being as respectful as they used to be. The eye-rolls and back-talk threaten our parental authority and we feel disrespected. They begin pushing for greater freedoms and privileges and we don't take to it too well.

Some of us decide to take a hard stance and meet their disrespect and pushing the boundaries with a demand for obedience (the "because I said so" doctrine!) Others of us just step aside and let our kids rule or micromanage and do everything for them or try to talk them into submission through persuasion, reasoning, and education (poor kids!)



Unfortunately, we missed what scientific research tells us is most important during adolescence: shifting our focus from *the respect we want to receive* to *the respect we show for them*.

This shift is key to maintaining our connection to them and their cooperation with us.

The main way our teens and tweens gauge our respect for them is by our reaction to their need for autonomy. This need to be in control of their own actions and to have freedom of choice is an overriding factor in an adolescent's life. This makes total sense because this time of life is preparing them for adulthood where they will be autonomous and will need to command respect from others.

Teens feel autonomous when given responsibilities, when they have the freedom to “own” their mistakes and successes, to make choices, and feel their actions, opinions, thoughts and emotions are taken into consideration and actually matter.

When our teen's autonomy is threatened, they shut down and refuse to cooperate. When we command, demand, “put our foot down”, “lay down the law” mandate their “obedience”, they feel coerced, controlled and criticized and therefore their autonomy is threatened. Even when we do too much for them, fix their mistakes, or otherwise show our lack of confidence in their abilities, we threaten their autonomy.

Our connection (our “secure attachment” in psychology-speak) to our teens allows us to remain an influence in their lives, and provides benefits like increased mental health and social and emotional skills and decreases risky behaviors.

Remember this as you try to get them to cooperate with you in any way (doing something or *not* doing something). Get their opinion and input, negotiate, work with them to solve the problem or address the issue, give credence to their wants and needs, allow them choices. Trust me (or maybe, science), it's the best way. The more we try to control our teens, the more they rebel.

#4 They want your trust and need your praise



As much as they may act like they don't care what you think, they absolutely do. They care whether you trust them with an “adult” task or responsibility. They appreciate it when you show them you believe they can handle something important, or when you ask for their opinion or get them to show you how to do something. And they need your praise when they've stepped up, gone beyond what they could have or what they haven't done before. They internalize these things to build their self-esteem. But also remember not to go overboard or make too big of a deal out of things, they don't want *that* much attention. Just be sincere.

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When our teen's autonomy is threatened, they shut down and refuse to cooperate."

#5 Be honest about your feelings

Good communication with your teen will inevitably involve sharing how you feel about certain things from time to time. This may be especially true when you start deciphering your shark music and coming to terms with the possibility that you may have been too controlling in one area or another.

Letting your teen know why you've behaved a certain way or feel so strongly about something can be a great way to encourage ongoing dialogue between you. When you do share, be sure and use "I" statements so the focus remains on your feelings about the issue rather than on them.

In the book *Positive Discipline for Teens*, the authors even suggest adding a bit to the usual statement. Here's what it would sound like, "I feel _____ because _____ and I wish _____". So, you may say something like I feel annoyed when I see bags of open chips in the cupboard because they get stale and have to be thrown out and I wish you'd put clips on them before you put them up."

Notice that you don't say "I feel annoyed because you don't put the clip on the chips". The "I" statement is about telling them what makes you feel a certain way without blaming someone else for making you feel it (remember we are responsible for how we feel about something - no one else). So, what you're saying is this certain thing makes me feel a specific way, so I'd really appreciate it if you'd help me out by doing another thing, so I don't have to feel this way anymore! This removes blame and is also a great way to model for your teen how to share *their* feelings with you.

#6 Apologize when you should

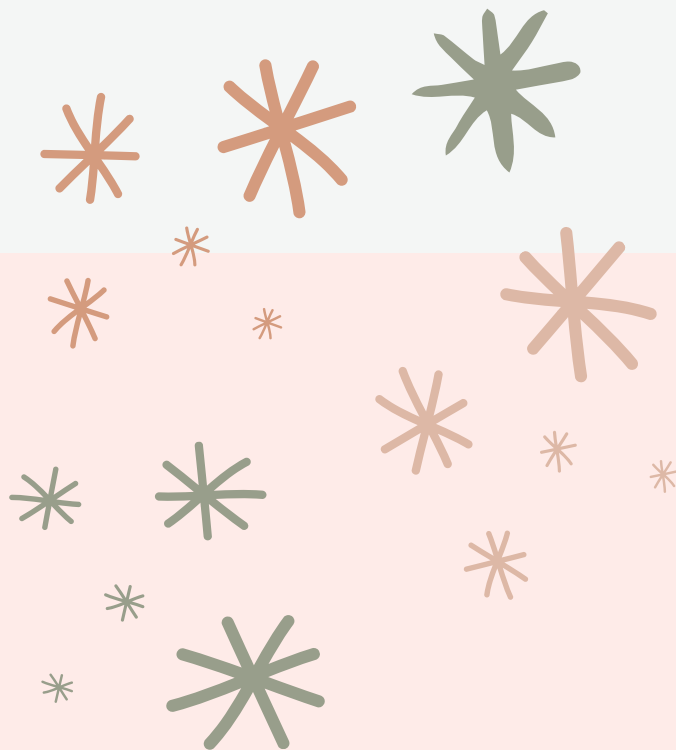
Apologizing to our teens when we've yelled or stepped over the line is something we may overlook too often but it's so important to any relationship, especially between us and our kids.

Obviously, there are going to be many times when we snap at our teen, ignore their feelings, issue some sort of crazy consequence, yell, bark a command. Anytime we do this and don't apologize, it chips away at the connection between us, and our child and it teaches them you can treat people poorly and not apologize.

Feeling bad about it isn't enough, the apology must be made. So, after things have calmed down, you approach your child honestly and tell them you shouldn't have done whatever it is you did, and that you'd like to apologize.

But also remember that you can't apologize for the same things over and over and expect it to mean anything. An apology should come with a promise to do better and then follow through on that promise.

Make apologies the norm.



The Nitty Gritty

13 DON'TS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR TEEN TO ENGAGE THEIR COOPERATION

And here we get into the nitty gritty! Following is a long list of "don'ts" based on scientific research and basic principals of communication. Again, remember your goals; cooperation without straining the connection with your teen.



#1 Don't use guilt

For example: "Since you wouldn't clean your room, I spent hours in here doing it for you." or "I do everything for you, and you can't do this one simple thing?!" We've all been shamed before and it's not cool.

#2 Check your ego at the door

You cannot take their ravings personally. Remember their changing brain. You cannot allow statements like "You never do anything for me" send you into a speech about how you've sacrificed your career, figure, and social life for your teen (even if it's true!!) Your emotional regulation is central.

#3 Never lecture

For a teen or tween, saying more than a sentence about a topic, is a "lecture". If you want them to tune you out, ask them to sit down for a "talk" and proceed to list the pros and cons of their behavior. It will not work. Don't even try. Always keep things short and to the point, when correcting, directing, or guiding.

#4 No "nagging"

Okay, so you and I both know that a teens' definition of nagging and ours is quite different. One request could translate as nagging to the adolescent amygdala. But there are times when we tend to repeat ourselves unnecessarily. Stop repeating yourself. We'll discuss other ways to handle requests in a minute.

#5 Don't use judgmental language

"How could you be that irresponsible? That jacket was expensive and now it's ruined! I can't believe you did that!" or "It was really naïve of you to think you would make an A after studying 20 minutes." "Why would you do such a thing? That's the height of laziness!" When we use such negative descriptive terms when talking to our teens, they hear us saying "You're irresponsible." "You're naïve." "You're lazy." They've internalized these terms we've judged them with, and we don't want that.

#6 Don't blame

Don't join in when teens and siblings engage in blaming. Sibling disagreements should not focus on who did what to whom. Don't engage in that game with them. Tell them you're not interested in blame, only solutions. Additionally, do not use accusatory language with your teen, such that they feel blamed for something. For example, "Why did you get paint on your new bedspread? I spent on fortune on it, and it's ruined!"

#7 Don't use threats

It's really easy to get into the "if you don't _____, I'm going to (or not going to) _____". This is a disaster in the making and will just initiate a power struggle. This is different from making an agreement in advance but threatening to try and get cooperation is a non-starter.

#8 No commands, orders or demands

Remember principal #3 (autonomy over obedience). Again, if you want to start a power struggle just tell your teen, "Set the table, NOW" or "Turn that X-box off this minute and start your homework". Remember, you wouldn't say this to a colleague or your spouse, so why would you say this to your teen? It's simply disrespectful to order anyone around (unless you're both in the military). There are better ways and we'll discuss them shortly.

#9 Don't speak to them like "children"

Teens, again, are seeking autonomy and trust. They consider themselves much more mature than we see them. Honor and respect how they see themselves by speaking to them in a more mature manner. Especially when their friends are around. Try to imagine they're 30 when speaking to them!

#10 Don't yell at them from another room

This one was a biggie at our house (and still is with my husband). Get used to the idea of either stopping what you're doing to walk into the room with your teen to say something to them, use Alexa drop-in or call them, text them, anything but yelling from the kitchen up to their bedroom to ask them a question. It rarely turns out well.

#11 Put Away the Crystal Ball

Fear makes us predict our teen's future. For example, "I'm telling you, if you keep hanging out with Joe, you're going to end up in jail!" or "If you can't even clean up your room, you'll never be able to take care of a car or a house." Or "If you don't start taking responsibility for your own actions and stop blaming everyone else, you're going to end up with no friends." Stop trying to predict the future with your kids. Remind yourself that you're nothing like you were when you were a teenager!

#12 Leave it until after friends have gone

Don't bring up your teen's misbehavior in front of or when their friends are at your house. Any conversation about behavior should be private and respect their feelings. You can't accomplish this in front of their peers. Not only that, but it's uncomfortable for their friends as well.

#13 Don't speak to them in a way you wouldn't want to be spoken to

Remember we are always modeling behavior with our teens. If we often raise our voices, use sarcasm (I'm raising my hand), interrupt, we can expect the same back from them. Remember the goal is to always have calm, respectful discourse, and to consider how their changing brain impacts their thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

7 THINGS TO DO TO BETTER ENGAGE THEIR COOPERATION

And here we get into the nitty gritty! Following is a long list of "don'ts" based on scientific research and basic principals of communication. Again, remember your goals; cooperation without straining the connection with your teen.

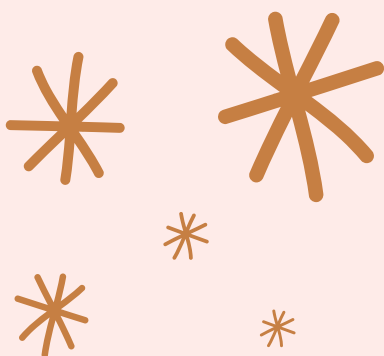


#1 State the issue

When you see your teen doing something they shouldn't, simply state the issue and give them the opportunity to decide how to proceed. For example, when you see your son, as usual, set his sweaty cup down on the coffee table. Rather than saying, "Please get the cup off the table and grab a coaster", you could say, "That cup's going to leave a ring on the coffee table" and let him interpret what to do about it (hoping he gets it!)

#2 Be honest about your feelings

Remember we said in we should always try to be honest about our feelings? So, rather than lashing out, commanding, or scolding, try that. For example, before school you asked, and your daughter agreed to pick up her dirty clothes and put them in the hamper before leaving. When you get home from work you find all of them still in the floor. Instead of saying, "Why did you not put the clothes in the hamper this morning like I asked you to?!" you say, "I felt extremely frustrated when I got home today and saw your clothes still in the floor because you assured me you were going to clean up before school and I wish you would just follow through when so tell me you're going to do something." Remember, during any conversation like this to listen fully to your teen and acknowledge their feelings before deciding what to do. For example, if your daughter apologizes and says her ride came early, then you could say, "okay, I understand sometimes things happen beyond our control", and she should proceed with her task at that point.



#3 Give guidance

For a teen or tween, saying more than a sentence about a topic, is a “lecture”. If you want them to tune you out, ask them to sit down for a “talk” and proceed to list the pros and cons of their behavior. It will not work. Don’t even try. Always keep things short and to the point, when correcting, directing, or guiding.

#4 Offer Choices

Rather than commanding, demanding, or threatening, simply offer choices that are acceptable to you and your teen. For example, your teen has asked to spend the night with a friend when she has a soccer match at 8:00 am. Instead of saying, “You can’t spend the night tonight, you have a soccer match in the morning.” you might try, “Since you have a soccer match in the morning, why don’t you go over to Amy’s for a couple of hours, and I’ll pick you up or you could spend the night tomorrow night.”

#5 Use only a word or two

Rather than lectures, constant reminders, and reprimands, try keeping it short and sweet so they don’t become defensive. This is less likely to trigger their amygdala and more likely to gain cooperation. For example, you walk by your teen’s bathroom and see tissues and empty shampoo bottles in the floor and say, “How many times have I told you to keep the trash in your wastebasket? It’s disgusting in there.” Instead, try, “there’s trash in your bathroom floor”. Or, you see your teen, as usual, set his sweaty cup down on the coffee table. Rather than saying, “Get that cup off the table and grab a coaster!” you could try, “coaster”.


#6 Respectfully define expectations

Instead of just complaining about what they’ve done wrong, clearly, and respectfully define your expectations for their behavior. For example, you overhear your teen saying something hurtful to his girlfriend and you say, “Why are you so rude and hateful to her. If I were her, I wouldn’t put up with that for a minute.” Instead try, “You know in our family we’ve always valued being respectful to others, especially those closest to us. I know you’re going to apologize, and I expect you not to speak to her that way again.”



#7 Try Humor

And finally, humor can take the place of most any negative communication trap. Get past your Shark Music and think about what would get your teen's attention and either make them say "you're so Xtra" or even chuckle out loud. Remember you need to be able to "read the room" because humor will only work if they're in the mood for it. Challenge them to a game called "guess how many dirty socks are under the bed?" and then get him to pull them all out and count! If you can get past your own frustration or annoyance to try to engage them this way, it's often a life saver. If they're supposed to scrub their tub, take shaving cream and write "clean me" on the bottom or on the shower wall. Use your imagination, they might come to really appreciate it every now and then.

So, there you have it... 

the groundwork principals to employ and the do's and don'ts (or don'ts and do's) for getting your teen or tween to actually cooperate with you. And if you think about each of these, it all makes sense doesn't it? Their changing brain, our shark music, autonomy and respect...*of course*, it all comes together to obtain cooperation and to maintain our connection.

I discuss the connection with our teens a lot more in the parenting course, "Communicating with neurogility", but just remember how very important it is to stay connected. Our connection or bond with our teens is the only thing that truly gives us influence in their lives. We can try various methods of control to get them to behave the way we want but in the end, it simply backfires. Teens want and need autonomy. They want and need respect. If we don't work hard to provide them with both, our connection weakens, they will rebel against our authority and are likely do the very things we are trying to keep them from doing.

Remember, this doesn't mean we allow them to do whatever they want - far from it. We set and enforce boundaries but we also invite their participation in setting those boundaries. We ask for their thoughts and opinions about the issues that involve them (from curfews to AP classes) and we pay close attention to their emotions that come out when they don't know how to express their thoughts and opinions.

If you're having a hard time reconciling all of this with the way you've parented so far, it may be time to reevaluate. None of it made any sense to me either just a few short years ago when my son was a teen. But after a tumultuous couple of years filled with arguments, broken curfews, broken doors and generally risky behavior, I discovered my "because I said so" parenting style was not working. If what you've tried so far hasn't provided the results you seek, it's not going to just because you keep doing it over and over again. It's probably time for a new take on things.

Hey there!

I'm Ann Coleman and struggled parenting my son during his teen years. After turning things around, I continued studying the science of adolescence and of parenting adolescents. I made the switch from attorney to parent educator and podcaster to help you avoid the mistakes I made.

If you enjoyed this Guide you may be interested in **PARENT CAMP**, which will help you strengthen the relationship with your teen, decrease the conflict and improve their behavior. Check out the **PARENT CAMP** membership and learn about the course, the weekly meetups with me, the monthly expert Q & As with subject matter experts who cover everything from drug use to self-harm, and the community forum, weekly challenges, and more.

Ann Coleman



Speaking *of* Teens



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