

# Giant Book of Parenting ADHD Teens

## Parenting an Emotionally Dysregulated Teen

Bonus Download - Episode 13

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**Speaking  
of  
Teens**

# Tips from Adolescent ADHD Experts





As I mentioned in episode 13, I've gathered as many specific tips as possible from experts in adolescent ADHD.

All of these tips fit within the parenting framework recommended by the latest scientific research to help increase emotional regulation in our ADHD teens. The great thing is that it's also the best parenting style for neurotypical teens as well.

Please read the other guides in this pdf to get a broader view of the information you need to parent your teen (both neurodivergent and neurotypical) in a way that a) helps you maintain a strong connection, b) teaches them emotional intelligence, c) keeps drama to a minimum, and d) protects their mental and physical wellbeing.

Also be sure and check the podcast weekly for parenting advice, most all of which applies to your child as well as a neurotypical teen.

I consider the following the "basic" podcast episodes *all* parents of teens should listen to:

1, 3, 4, 6, 8, 14, 15, 16, 22 and 26

I would also recommend for you:

19, 27, 30, 32, 33, 34, 39, 41, 42, 43, 57, 58, 60, 78, 95



### **Decrease your stress:**

As much as possible, we need to decrease the stress in our lives. Parenting *neurotypical* teens is hard and I don't need to tell you that parenting a neurodivergent teen is *even harder*. Parenting is stressful enough so try to say "no" more to other things that stress you out. I know it's easier said than done but this is major if you want to be able to handle your teen's emotional dysregulation without becoming dysregulated yourself. Give yourself a certain day or time of day to do the things that relieve your stress and make you happy. Write in a gratitude journal (scientifically proven to help), listen to music, dance...whatever it takes! And learn to notice when your stress level is climbing so you can take extra measures before it's too late.

### **Set Clear and Specific Rules:**

Keep the "musts" to a minimum - remember the ADHD brain. Keep rules in 3 categories: 1) Information you require from them (e.g., where they're going to be, who will they be with, who are the parents, what are their phone numbers, etc.), 2) Permission they require (e.g., running late for curfew, app use, purchases, etc.), 3) Complete Prohibitions (e.g., anything that's totally off limits). Review rules regularly because they may need to change (especially as they get older) and let them know the complete prohibitions are non-negotiable but be prepared to negotiate the others. Being too rigid makes no sense and only causes rebellion. Listen to their reasoning and bend where you can. Be ready to enforce the rules with natural or logical consequences (if there are no natural). And avoid saying no too quickly and too often. Remember that negotiation gives them autonomy and allows them to practice life skills. If it's a true no, just be ready with your reason and stick to it.

### **Avoid Negative Body Language:**

Hovering over someone is never a great way to have a conversation – especially with a teen and especially if they have ADHD. If you're standing over them or you're standing and they're sitting, it puts you in a dominant position which can read as confrontational. Always try to be on the same level with them and if possible, rather than being across from them, get beside them (in a car, walking, on the sofa, etc.). Additionally, avoid arms crossed in front of you, hands on your hips, and facial expression or gestures (e.g., eye rolling) that can be viewed as disrespectful or hostile. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Emotion Coaching” and “Communication for Cooperation”)**

### **Help Them Develop Coping Mechanisms:**

Here we're talking about specific tactics your teen can use when they feel dysregulated or feel it coming on. Talk to them when they're calm about putting together a list of things they can do when they feel they're going to explode. For example, they might put together a box with a variety of things they can use depending on what calms them down or makes them happy (e.g., a journal, a special book, art supplies, fidget toys, etc.). They could take a run, get in the shower, listen to a certain music playlist, play with the dog, do mindfulness meditation, etc.). The key is coming up with this list when they're not already upset.

Then when they do use a good coping skill be sure to acknowledge it (even if it happens when you're in the middle of a conversation with them!) and praise them (reasonably) for it. Don't go overboard or talk to them like they're a child.

### **Communicate Unconditional Love and Forgiveness:**

The most important thing all of our kids need to hear and feel from us is unconditional love and forgiveness. Because of all the extra stress at school, emotional dysregulation, trouble with peers, potential low self-esteem, anxiety, etc., our ADHD teens need HEAPS of this. They need to hear us say it. They need to hear “there’s nothing you can ever do that will make me stop loving you.” They need to hear, “there’s nothing you can ever do that I won’t forgive – because I love you.” Say it out loud and often. Never assume they just know it in their heart – they need to hear it. Tell them you’re on the same team – always – and that will never change. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Emotion Coaching”)**

### **Don’t Take their Behavior Personally:**

Remind yourself daily that they are not doing this to you. They are going to say things when they are emotionally dysregulated that are “disrespectful”, “mean”, “ugly” and no, they cannot help it. Really. They do not do this with other people (not likely anyway), they do it with you because they can let it all out and feel safe. That’s a good thing. They understand that you’ll forgive them, love them unconditionally and help them calm down. They don’t mean what they say in the heat of the moment. They do not even want to say it. Do not take it personally. Do not hold it against them. Do not stop them mid-rant to try and correct them (“don’t talk to me that way”, “stop being so disrespectful”, etc.), you can talk calmly after the storm and most likely they will apologize before you even broach the subject. Simply remind them that you’d rather them not use certain language or not speak to you in a certain way. But don’t dwell – it’s truly not the big deal that we think it is most times. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Emotional Awareness Strategies”)**

### **Acknowledge their Struggles with ADHD:**

Of course, you need to acknowledge all their feelings and struggles but with our ADHD kids, we need to specifically acknowledge that certain things are really difficult for them. When they complain, get frustrated, etc. about things they find really hard because of their ADHD (or other learning issue), be sure to empathize with that struggle, ask questions and try to really understand it from their point of view. And ask them if they need your help or if they just need to vent. You don't want to jump in with advice or try and fix something without an invitation (and even still, there may be cause to step away). If you do not have ADHD yourself, it may be difficult for you to understand some of the hardships they face. Read what you can and ask them to explain what they're going through and just believe them when they tell you. Let them know you get it and that you're there for them. **(See the pdf in this bundle, "Emotion Coaching")**

### **Remember they're Doing the Best they Can:**

When they're freaking out, losing it, melting down, remember if they could do better, they would. They're not doing it on purpose, and they don't even want to be doing it at all. Their brain does not work like yours (even if you're ADHD, at least you have your adult brain!). Again, remind yourself it's not personal, acknowledge their struggles with ADHD and know, without a doubt, if they could be holding it together in that moment, they would be. The gasket has blown, and they can't find it. So, it's your job as the adult in the room to help them. This is where you listen, acknowledge their emotions, etc. **(See the pdf in this bundle, "Emotion Coaching")**

### **Educate them About their ADHD Adolescent Brain:**

All teens need to understand the changes their brain is going through during adolescence and what challenges that will bring. But ADHD kids need to understand the special challenges they will face. Explain what you learned in episode #13 or let them listen to it. They're old enough to understand and it will be empowering for them to finally "get it"! It's hard to feel different and not really know why you feel that way. Once they understand the neurobiological reasons for what they go through every day, they'll be able to say "oh, yeah, that's just my ADHD" - that's powerful! **(See the pdf in this bundle, "The Challenging Adolescent Brain")**

### **Tell them How Great the ADHD Brain can be:**

Let them know how fantastic the ADHD brain is compared to a "neurotypical" brain. Research shows the ADHD brain is marvelously creative, entrepreneurial, and can hyper-focus on things of interest. People with ADHD are resilient (thank you struggles!); they're talkative and great conversationalists; they have a great sense of humor; they're spontaneous and courageous; they have lots of energy which means they are normally good at sports and other physical activities, and many become very socially adept in adulthood. **(Watch the 2021, award-winning documentary, called The Disruptors, with them. It features all sorts of famous folks with ADHD and talks about how it's a superpower!! You can rent on Amazon and YouTube)**



### **Celebrate the Wins, no Matter how Small:**

Positive feedback is so important with ADHD teens. They hear enough criticism from teachers, school staff, peers, siblings, etc. If you want to stay connected and remain an influence in their life, stop critiquing and criticizing (especially if it's at all associated with the ADHD that they cannot control) and start celebrating the victories. Be their biggest cheerleader! If they use restraint where they usually don't – make sure they know you noticed (now, don't go overboard, teens don't like that!). If they sat down to do homework without being told or offered to help you fold laundry...time to celebrate. You need to be making at least 5 positive statements for every negative statement – and that's for a neurotypical teen. With an ADHD teen, go ahead and triple those positives! If you have a hard time finding something to praise, you need to step back and reevaluate the way you think about your teen and what you value in them. They are worth more than grades and other accomplishments. Look at who they are as a person. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Communication for Cooperation”)**

### **Help Them Find their Passion:**

All teens need a passion, something they're good at and can feel accomplished and successful doing, but this is especially true for a teen with ADHD. They see themselves as “failures” at so much. They feel defeated and criticized from all sides so often. They need something where they can really shine – something they can really feel good about. It may be a team sport, but it could be many, many other things as well. Art, dirt bikes, archery, community service, web design, jewelry making, horseback riding, the list is endless. Help them figure it out and then support them in their efforts 100%.

### **Focus on the solution, not the problem:**

You can talk about the problem all day long, go over and over how much you don't like something they've done or how they've not done something they should have done but that's not going to do anything but lead to frustration, anger, and arguments. Move on. Everyone knows the problem, work with them to find a solution. If they can't get to school on time, simply state the fact and ask them how they think this issue can be resolved. Brainstorm and throw it all out there and then pick one and try it. Along the same lines, don't bring up issues from the past (if they've tried this solution before and it didn't work, that doesn't mean it won't work this time). Telling them what they've done wrong in the past is not only defeating to them but it hurts their self-esteem and just shows them you have no faith in them to do better in the future.

### **Become Emotionally Aware and Regulated:**

This is huge. If you aren't fully aware of your own emotions, you can't regulate them. Becoming emotionally aware is then, the first step to that emotional regulation. Our ADHD teens can get the best of the most calm and regulated person around – I know this from experience. But, if you're also dysregulated on a regular basis, you must take steps now to do something about it. It's not only your parental responsibility but it's your responsibility to yourself. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Emotional Awareness Strategies”)**

### **Don't Attack them or their Character:**

Forget trying to win an argument because that should never be your goal. Venting and debating and arguing only make everyone miserable and accomplish absolutely nothing. When this happens, you could also end up making disparaging comments or saying something that sounds very disrespectful and teens with ADHD (all teens, actually) are very sensitive to being respected – and they should be. Watch language that attacks their character rather than describing the behavior (lazy, sloppy, etc.). **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Communication for Cooperation”)**

### **Be Clear and Specific with Requests:**

Asking a teen with ADHD to “clean their room” is like asking them to memorize a science book. It's too much. It's overwhelming. All they can see is the mess and they can't figure out where to start. It's agonizing. Instead, give them a specific task like “please pick up all the clothes and put them in the hamper”. Notes help a lot too. You can work with them to make a short list of tasks that need to be done before bed every night and in the morning before school. You can even make checklists for what to check before walking out the door in the morning. Just remember, small chunks rather than giant pieces. And also remember that requests work a lot better than demands. Demands will get you nowhere with any teen. **(See the pdf in this bundle, “Communication for Cooperation”)**

### **Keep Check-ins to a Minimum:**

If your teen is supposed to be studying or doing a specific task, you should not check up on them every few minutes to “see how it’s going”. First, it makes people with ADHD nervous and frustrated when their thoughts are interrupted by outside forces. Once they get into a rhythm of thinking and working, they don’t want to break it. Second, your constant check-ins tell them that you don’t trust them or don’t think they’re capable of doing what they’re supposed to be doing without your oversight or supervision. Instead, agree on a time they’ll come let you know how far along they are or when they’ve finished (and stick to it).

### **Make Sure You’re on the Same Calendar:**

The ADHD teen doesn’t like appointments to begin with but if they have one, don’t remember it, and they’ve made other plans, I may not need to tell you that you’ve got a problem. Predictability and autonomy are really important to them and if they’ve made plans and you walk in the door to announce the psychiatry appointment in 15 minutes, they’ll wig out. So, agree on some sort of system to use to make sure they know days, hours, and minutes ahead that they have an appointment they cannot miss. You might try a daily post-it on the bathroom mirror beginning a week in advance, “Dr. Appt. in 7 days (Tues. Aug 9th 11 am)” The next day another one goes up with “6 days”, etc. A one-month calendar page printout could work too. Whatever it takes to help them see how far off it is and realize it’s approaching.

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**On the following pages  
you'll find the guides:**

*The Challenging Adolescent Brain*

*Emotional Awareness Strategies*

*Emotion Coaching*

*Communication for Cooperation*

Please let me know if you need any specific help or direction. I have a soft spot in my heart for anyone parenting a teen with ADHD. You can reach me at [acoleman@speakingofteens.com](mailto:acoleman@speakingofteens.com)

Also, be sure to download *Your Teen and Anxiety* and all the other Free guides [here](#).



# The Challenging Adolescent Brain

How the neurobiological changes happening during adolescence impact your teens' thoughts, emotions and behavior



Ann Coleman, JD  
Parent Educator and Host, Speaking of Teens Podcast

# THE CHALLENGING ADOLESCENT BRAIN

When our kids begin puberty and move on through their “teen years”, we make a lot of assumptions about their behavior; namely, that they have as much self-control, ability to make good decisions and act like “rational humans” as we do. Nothing could be further from the truth. So, rather than wonder why your teen can act like such a jerk, can be so mean or do the “dumbest things”, read on and learn what’s *really* going on.

*Ann Coleman*

**Disclaimer:** I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I say in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child’s mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child’s pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder. If they display signs that they may want to harm themselves, please call 988 for assistance or 911 for an imminent threat.

Speaking  
*of*  
Teens



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”



*Overnight my sweet child who used to think I was everything, is now embarrassed by me. He stays up half the night, can't wake up in the morning, gets angry for no reason, won't do anything I ask, doesn't think before he acts, and argues with me constantly.*

What the heck happened to our sweet kid?! It's not just "hormones", or laziness. They're not manipulative or entitled. They're not being "mean" or spoiled. It's much more complicated than *any* of that!

The brain goes through enormous structural and functional changes during adolescence that have a major impact on their thoughts, emotions, and behavior. They're just as confused about this as we are. The goal of this e-book is to help you understand what they're going through so you can begin to empathize with them. This empathy will help you temper your own thoughts, emotions and behavior when you interact with them.

”

*Mom, I don't want to feel this way. I don't want to act this way. But my thoughts and my feelings are all mixed up right now. I feel like I'm stage and everyone's judging me. All I want to do is to be liked, fit in and have friends. But every day I feel like I'm walking on egg shells and waiting for the next stressful thing to slap me in the face. I just wish you understood what it's like to be me. Things are different than they were when you were my age.*







# #1 Adolescence

## a Second Phase of Brain Growth

Researchers believe the changes the brain goes through from puberty until around the mid to late 20s is a second major phase of brain growth very similar to the first, which takes place from birth to around age three.

So, all that moody and emotional behavior, all those nutty things they do, the trouble they get into, can all be blamed on these neurobiological changes they're going through. Hormones play a role, yes, but they aren't *everything*. Your kid can't help the way these changes impact their thoughts, emotions and behavior.

*Throughout this e-book, the terms **adolescent**, **child**, **kid**, **teen**, or **tween**, are all used to refer to someone in the age range of 10 to 25.*

Additionally, the use of the term **parent**, refers to any adult caring for or raising an adolescent, including relatives or non-relatives.

Because the brain is not fully programmed until around the mid to late 20s, many scientists now include everyone from age 10 all the way through age 25 in the *adolescent* category.

So, remember, just because the law declares your kid an “adult” at age 18, they still have many years to go before their brain reaches that status!

These changes in brain structure start at puberty (around age 9 or 10 for girls and 10 to 12 for boys)...although no one has to tell you this! Their brain is essentially going through the same changes it went through from birth to age 3...BIG changes.

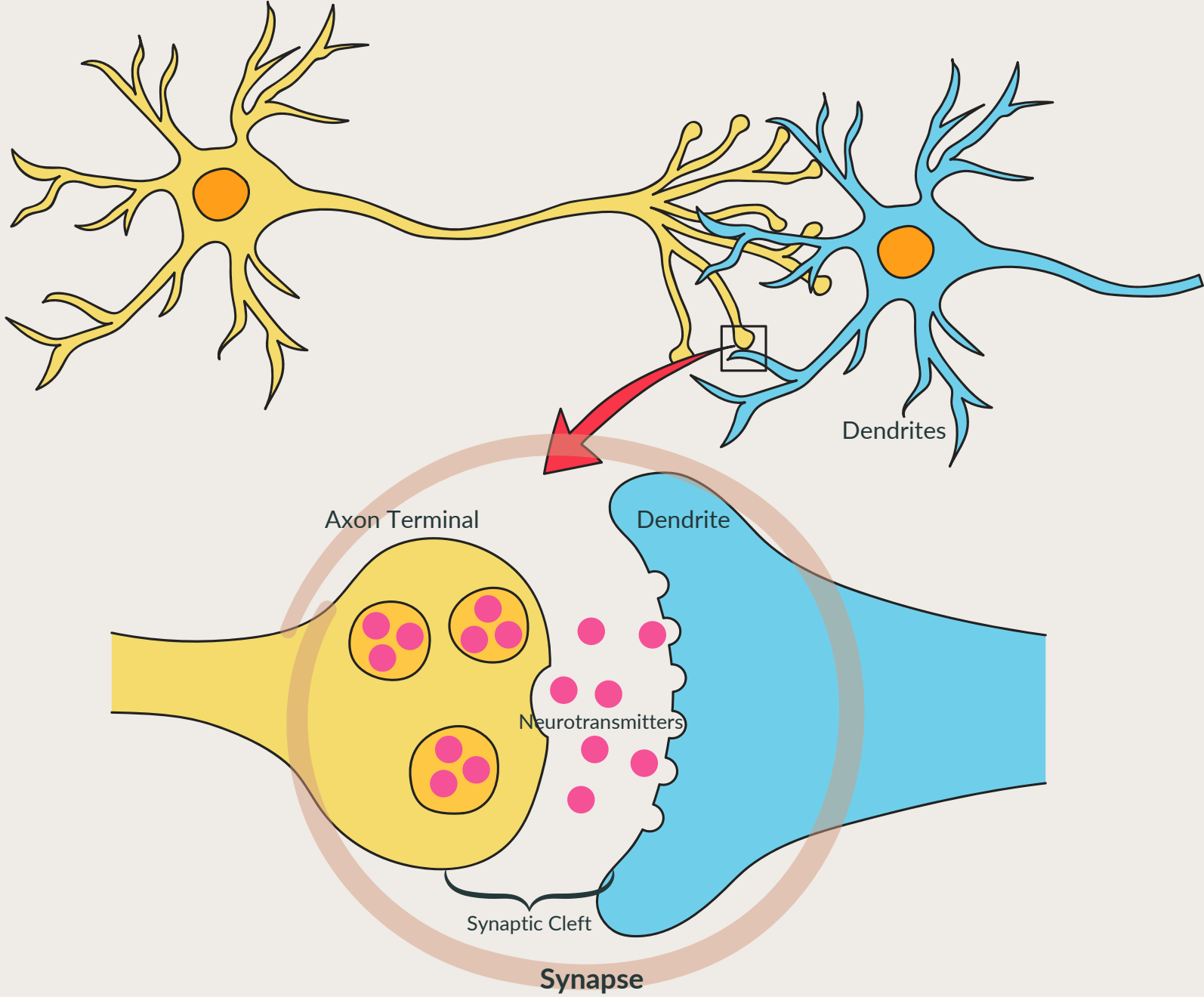
The connections between an adolescent’s brain cells (the synapses) are literally programming themselves based on the individual’s life experiences. The more they learn, experience or do a certain thing, the stronger the brain is “programmed” for that thing. This is known as neuroplasticity.

If you want to dig a little deeper, over these 15 years or so, the brain undergoes changes that start with its “building blocks” or neurons (aka, *brain cells*.)

The brain contains billions of neurons that link together to form complex neural pathways. These pathways allow various areas of the brain to communicate with each other and allow the brain to communicate with the rest of the body. To truly “get it,” look at the next page.







Neurons facilitate this communication by passing chemical messages, called neurotransmitters, along these pathways. The neurotransmitters pass over tiny gaps (they synaptic cleft) between one neuron's dendrites and the next neuron's axon terminals - this meeting point is called a synapse. (See Illustration Above)

During the first 3 years of life, these neural pathways are being constructed, programmed, and expended as we experience the world around us. It was only just over 20 years ago that scientists believed these pathways were completely programmed by the time we reached kindergarten. But we know they are only 95% completed by around age 6 - we still have another 5% to go.



This final 5% of brain programming begins when at around age 9 to 11 right before puberty (younger for females, older for males,) our brain begins another significant phase of programming,

The neurons in the frontal lobe of our brain suddenly sprout billions of additional dendrites, which means there are billions of additional synapses over which neurotransmitters pass.

About a year after reaching puberty, these synapses begin the long and slow process of pruning and strengthening. All those extra synapses we're not using regularly, begin to be pruned (they shrivel up and fall away) and those we're using on a regular basis get stronger and faster and more efficient at passing messages.

As we will discuss in more detail below, this pruning and strengthening is based on our experiences and learning; the more we learn, experience, or do a certain things, the stronger the synaptic connections become.

but if we fail to learn or do a particular things, those synapses are pruned.

This slow and extended period of brain development and programming is not completed until we're somewhere around 25 years old, at which time the brain is considered fully mature.(1)

While we once believed a child's first few years of life were the most critical in terms of learning and protecting against negative influences, we now know adolescence is a second major developmental period; an even more extended opportunity for learning and growth.

# #2

# Neuroplasticity

## Adolescent Style



This lengthy period of neuronal pruning and strengthening begins in the back of the frontal lobe and gradually moves towards the front, ending up in the *prefrontal cortex*.

The brain's ability to reorganize itself by pruning and strengthening and making new connections, based on the immediate environment and learning experiences, is referred to as *neuroplasticity*.

You've no doubt heard this word thrown around in terms of apps the "train your brain" and other gimmicky pseudo-neuroscience programs.

However, neuroplasticity is a crucial part of brain development, our ability to learn things throughout our lives and the brain's ability to heal itself after an injury.

Without getting into the minutia, let's just say scientists have determined that adolescence is a very significant period of plasticity in which the brain is extremely sensitive to environmental stimuli or experiences.

The adolescent brain, as a matter of fact, is more plastic than the immediately previous childhood years and all the years following adolescence.(2) Scientists have even discovered that certain cognitive skills are learned better at certain stages of adolescence than any other time.(3)

The adolescent brain is constantly changing as it eliminates unused synapses and strengthens those routinely used - it literally programs itself to become most efficient. If certain circuits are being used frequently, it makes sense for the brain to strengthen those connections and eliminate unused connections.(4) This strengthening increases the speed and accuracy of communication between neurons.

Tactile and emotional experiences become more vivid as the brain absorbs information faster and easier and continues reinforcing synaptic connections. As one expert put it, "the brain changes characteristic of adolescence are among the most dramatic and important to occur during the human lifespan".(5)

Knowing this can be extremely empowering to parents and adolescents. For one thing, the more time adolescents spend in pursuit of positive relationships, hobbies, and interests, the more likely they will be to continue down that road. It also means that intelligence is not a static concept and that the brain can actually become stronger and more efficient through repeated exposure to information. An adolescent who may not have achieved academic success in the lower grades may find new hope and renewed zest for school if they understand they can harness the brain's neuroplasticity (through practice and repetition) to increase their intelligence.



Although adolescence is a unique opportunity for positive learning and growth it's also a period of extreme vulnerability to negative outcomes. In other words, "plasticity cuts both ways" and negative experiences are just as impactful as positive experiences.(6)

The adolescent's increased capacity to absorb experiences and solidify the brain's synaptic connections is completely dependent on how they choose to spend their time.(7) Regular exposure to environments, activities, experiences, and relationships will strengthen those related synaptic connections.

The problem is, the brain makes no distinction between strengthening *positive* versus *negative* connections. It is, therefore, imperative that adolescents are not only involved in as many positive activities, influences and environments as possible, but they must also avoid the negative.(8)

Routine exposure to environmental and experiential influences during adolescence will have a lasting neurobiological impact on the brain that can affect thought processes, emotions, and behavior for many years to come.

The more an adolescent is involved in negative behaviors or exposed to negative activities – the more likely they will be negatively impacted. And once a synaptic connection is solidified in the adolescent brain, for better or worse, it is very hard to reverse. This is great news if the connections are positive but truly worrisome if they are negative.

Therefore, it's extremely important for adolescents to realize that their personal choices determine which connections are strengthened and which are pruned and can have lifelong effects. This does not necessarily mean that neural patterns can't be changed after adolescence – we know it's very possible. However, according to science, learning new skills and habits (both good and bad) is much easier during adolescence and unlearning them is much more challenging once that window has closed.

The dilemma for parents is how to ensure adolescents are exposed to as many positive experiences and learning opportunities as possible while limiting the negative.

Obviously, we can't put our kid in a bubble at age 10 and keep them there until they turn 25. Some things are simply out of our control. And, as we will learn below, parts of the adolescent brain make it even more difficult for them to stay mentally healthy and physically safe.

This is why parental involvement and supervision is as important during our child's adolescence as it was during their younger years. Once they reach puberty (the official beginning of adolescence), the importance of parental or responsible adult oversight cannot be overstated. The problem is that while we focus on our involvement during our child's early years, many of us become less concerned with supervision as they get older. They do become more independent and often that can lead to a bit of complacency or a false sense of security on our part.

Unfortunately, as much as adolescents want us to believe otherwise, this is not a wise decision. In the pages that follow, you'll learn why the ability to control impulses, make good decisions and regulate emotions decreases significantly during adolescence. For these reasons, our oversight and guidance becomes even more crucial.





An adolescent's world is filled with an overabundance of negative influences that can potentially *hardwire* their brain and change their life's trajectory.

Too much free time, without parental or adult supervision or guidance, can be an open invitation for trouble.

Research substantiates the negative outcomes for kids who are left to their own devices on a regular basis. Those with a parent or responsible adult at home with them after school are less likely to steal, drink, smoke marijuana or inflict harm on others.

Similarly, adolescents in, "adult-supervised after school activities" are much less likely to use drugs than those who are not enrolled in these activities.

On the other hand, kids who have no parents or supervising adults at home after school, are more likely to use substances and engage in other less-than-desirable behaviors.(9)

Simply put; it is far easier for an adolescent to find a way to get into trouble during unscheduled, unsupervised time.

Quality activities with positive peer interaction and learning new and challenging things under adult supervision, is hands-down better than free time if the free time is unsupervised or spent in less positive pursuits.(10)

Obviously, we can't be on top of our kids at all times (nor should we be) but we or another responsible adult should be *present* and vigilant.



On the other hand, we must remember that *overscheduling* our kids can be problematic as well and try to limit activities that interfere with homework, sleep, and family time. It's a real balancing act for sure and one parents have struggled with for years. Just remember that "quality activities with positive peer interaction" doesn't necessarily mean lessons or instruction. Afterschool programs, late-stay, YMCA, and various community organizations offer opportunities for positive growth, supervision and structure. Always remember to investigate such opportunities closely and get recommendations and referrals from parents whose kids have attended.

As we will discuss later, the plasticity experienced during adolescence appears to increase the possibility of addiction issues and common mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Luckily, for the same reason, these issues are also more easily treatable during adolescence.(11)



# #3

# The Prefrontal Cortex

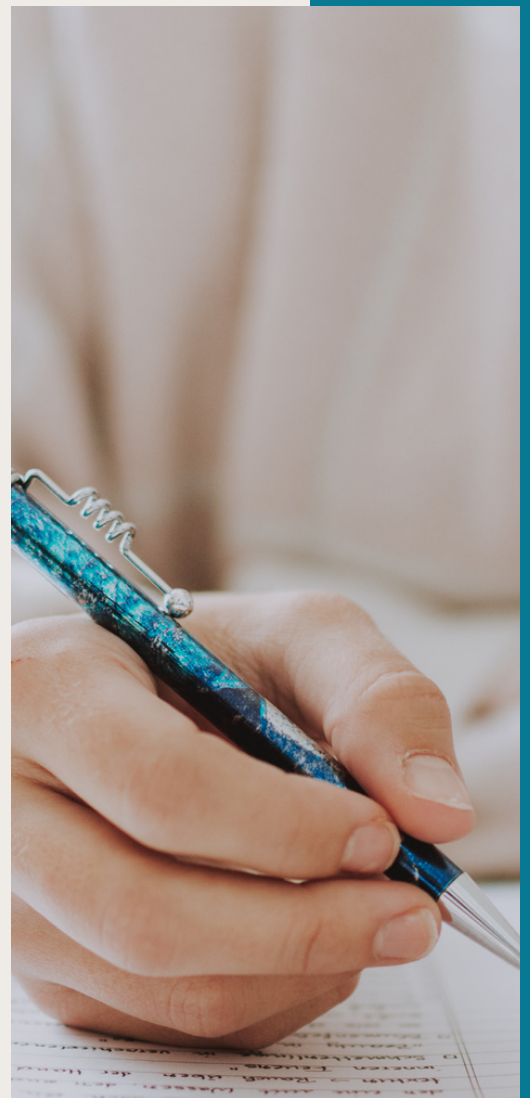
## Self-control and Good Decisions

As mentioned earlier, the synaptic pruning and strengthening process begins in the back of the frontal lobe and over time moves towards the front, to a region called the prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex is the very last area of the brain to be fully “programmed” and where much of the pruning and strengthening is concentrated during adolescence.

This means the prefrontal cortex is in a state of flux throughout adolescence, which as we will see, causes some profoundly difficult issues with their thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

These issues are easy to see once we understand the vast responsibilities of the prefrontal cortex and the critical role it plays in our daily life.







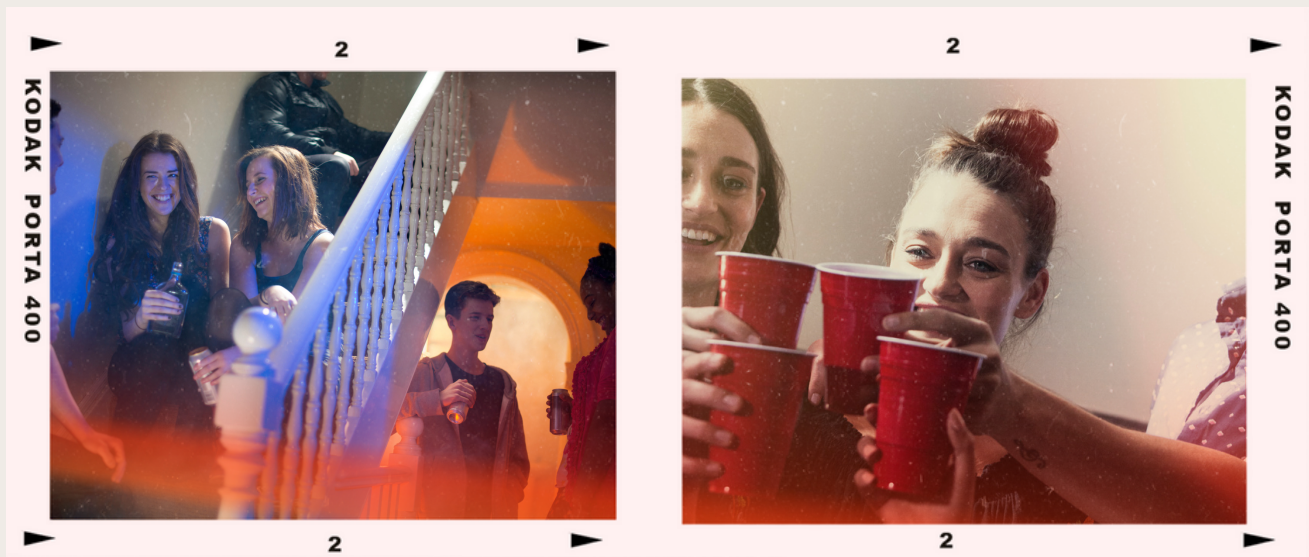
The prefrontal cortex is often appropriately called the CEO of the brain because it handles all *executive functions*. Executive functions (or skills) are those that allow us to organize our thoughts, reason, make rational decisions, solve problems, plan ahead, change plans on the fly, focus attention, ignore distractions, multi-task, watch out for errors, make quick decisions, control impulses, delay gratification, manage intense emotions and behave appropriately under specific circumstances.(12) Yeah, that's a lot for one part of the brain to handle.

These skills are not only necessary for thriving in our everyday life but crucial for academic and job performance and relationships.

We gradually learn and improve our executive functions throughout childhood with help from parents and caregivers at age-appropriate intervals. By adolescence, some basic executive functions are in place, but they are slowly refined as synapses are strengthened in the prefrontal cortex. Over the next 15 years or so, we gradually learn how to utilize these skills at the right time and in the right way.(13)

However, until the prefrontal cortex is completed this process, adolescents vary dramatically in their ability to bring these functions online. Factors such as early environment, genes, birth order and temperament play a role in one's ability to use these skills.

The category of executive function most required during adolescence and unfortunately, the one most lacking, is that of *inhibitory control*. Inhibitory control helps us maintain focus, avoid distractions, plan and follow through to complete tasks, filter our thoughts and control our impulses. In other words, it helps us *think before we act, make good decisions and use self-control.*(14)



Because the synapses in the prefrontal cortex are undergoing the pruning and strengthening process until one's mid-20s, executive functions are just not going to be at 100% capacity until sometime thereafter. This region of the brain is literally still rewiring and programming itself and can't possibly be expected to be fully functional. This is why adolescents are notorious for acting without thinking, for making poor decisions and for using little to no self-control.

Unfortunately, there are at least a couple of other brain regions that make it even more difficult for the adolescent prefrontal cortex to do its job. These other regions are fully functional and even increase in reactivity during adolescence. They are the *amygdala*, which impacts emotions, and the *reward system*, which controls certain motivational mechanisms. We'll discuss both in the sections that follow.



# #4 The Amygdala

## Emotional Behavior

The amygdala, located deep within the subcortical layer of the brain, is responsible for a lot of the behavior that causes us to label adolescents as irrational, moody and emotional. The still-programming prefrontal cortex is no match for the super active adolescent amygdala, which science proves is even more active than that of a child or an adult.(15)

This revved up amygdala causes some of the most problematic characteristics of adolescence including impulsivity, emotional reactivity, extreme emotional highs and lows and difficulty regulating emotions. The amygdala, involved in many of the brain's neural circuits, has been scientifically linked to everything from stress, aggression, and anxiety to addiction and risk-taking behavior.

To see why it causes such a problem for adolescents and their emotions, let's look at the amygdala's function.



FILM NEGATIVE



FILM NEGATIVE

FILM NEGATIVE

The amygdala plays the role of threat detector for the brain – a security guard of sorts. It sounds an alarm in the brain when through one of our senses it detects a threat in our immediate environment. The alarm then triggers certain hormones and neurotransmitters to be released and travel throughout the brain and body causing a response called *fight, flight, or freeze* (we'll call it the Triple-F response).

This cascade of chemicals, including adrenaline and cortisol, automatically results in physiological changes such as a racing heart, shallow breath, blood rushing to the extremities

The physiological response is meant to help us *flee* the danger, stand our ground and *fight*, or in some cases, it simply causes the body to completely shut down or *freeze*. These physiological and behavioral responses are accompanied by a range of corresponding psychological feelings (emotions) along a continuum of anger and/or fear, or even a complete inability to think (it takes over the prefrontal cortex.)

The Triple-F response can be lifesaving when we're in real physical danger, helping us to instantly avoid the threat of harm by running away or standing our ground to fight it off. This was extremely helpful during the early stages of human evolution when our ancestors were surrounded by real physical dangers. However, our society has evolved, and we are rarely confronted with life threatening situations.

The problem is the amygdala has not evolved as quickly and it still immediately responds to anything it perceives as the least bit threatening (just in case). This means *everyone's* amygdala often overreacts causing the Triple-F response *by mistake*, triggering the same physiological, behavioral, and psychological feelings and responses that happen with a *real* physical threat.



For example, someone throws a wadded-up piece of paper at your head, and you flinch, put your hand up or duck immediately, your heart might race and you might even become a little annoyed and exclaim.

When an adult's amygdala makes such a mistake (no need to duck or get upset - this was no boulder!), the Triple-F response begins but the prefrontal cortex is usually able to jump in right away stopping the response almost immediately. You calm down.

However, this is not so for the adolescent because the prefrontal cortex is too weak to step in and use self-control and rational thinking. So, for an adolescent, the Triple-F response continues, unchecked. In the case of the wadded-up paper, depending on the circumstances, an adolescent might become really angry and throw something back, yell or storm off.



Additionally, because the adolescent amygdala is supercharged and extra jumpy, it *overreacts all the time*, making many more mistakes than that of an adult or a child. This means adolescents mistakenly perceive all sorts of things as threats; a pop quiz, a tone in a friend's voice, a look from a family member, a simple question or comment. It turns out, the adolescent amygdala can interpret almost *anything* as a threat. Specifically, studies have shown the adolescent amygdala to be more reactive to social and emotional stimuli (interactions with and observations of people, facial expression recognition, etc.).(16)

As a matter of fact, research has shown that adolescents misinterpret neutral or ambiguous facial expressions as negative expressions (e.g., angry, fearful, disgusted, etc.) under laboratory conditions.(17) Some of these studies even point to misinterpretation of tone of voice (e.g., thinking a parent is belittling or scolding them when they're not). What this means is adolescents often mistakenly think friends, parents, teachers, or coaches are upset with them or feel negatively about them.



Remember that whether by mistake or not, the amygdala sets off the Triple-F response and the adolescent experiences the same physiological sensations, emotions, and behaviors as they would if a tiger had been chasing them or someone pulled a gun on them!

Physiologically, they may experience a range of sensations such as trembling, racing heart, feeling clammy, nauseous, sweaty, breathing difficulty, lightheadedness, etc. Emotionally, they could feel anything from slight annoyance to rage, or from slight nervousness to all out fear or complete brain shutdown.

Behaviorally, the Triple-F response can manifest in all sorts of ways from screaming and yelling, crying, sulking and silence to punching a fist through a wall or being unable to do anything at all. For a parent or other adult onlooker who sees no reason for the fuss, the adolescent's response is totally irrational, confusing, and completely out of left field. And in many cases the adolescent is just as confused.

Not surprisingly, it appears that acute stress increases reactivity in the adolescent amygdala. Further, research indicates the higher an adolescent's level of stress the lower their ability to engage the prefrontal cortex.

In other words, the more stressed out an adolescent is, the jumpier the amygdala becomes, making even more mistakes than usual, and at the same time, this stress further weakens the prefrontal cortex's ability to step in and stop the Triple-F response. And as we all know, adolescents are under plenty of stress these days.





Compared to both childhood and adulthood, adolescence is a uniquely stressful developmental period. An adolescent's environment is rife with daily stress, varying in degree depending on the individual; academic pressures, romantic relationships, friendships, family, etc., are daily realities.(18)

As if all this actual stress was not enough, adolescents also have higher levels of *perceived* stress. Studies have shown that an adolescent perceived stress has the same emotional and psychological impact as actual stress. In this case, perception *is* reality.(19)

And for adolescents who as younger children experienced abuse and neglect, loss of a parent, natural disaster, familial or community violence, socioeconomic hardship or worse, that developmental stress increases their amygdala's reactivity. The more intense the historic stress experienced, the more reactive the amygdala.(20) The diversity of stress experienced among adolescents is at least one reason emotional responses vary so widely once the amygdala is triggered.



It is also believed that both stress and the adolescent's perception of daily stress is a major factor in the development of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression because, as we discussed earlier, the developing brain is particularly vulnerable to negative input, like stress.(21)

So, what's the difference between stress and anxiety? Stress is caused by very real and current *external* forces (academic demands, relationship issues, family problems, etc.). Anxiety, on the other hand, is an *internal* state one feels *in response to the stress* and is based on real or imaginary threats that may occur at some unknown point in the future.(22) Anxiety causes us to be hypervigilant in anticipation that something bad will happen any minute, which primes the amygdala to be on guard at all times, which then leads to even more false alarms. Interpreting something as a threat when it is not a real threat is the central component of anxiety disorders.(23)

Each time the amygdala overreacts to a *perceived* threat, that perceived threat becomes more deeply imbedded in the amygdala's memory making it more likely to happen again the next time the same thing is encountered. This is how the brain invents threats from nothing.(24)

Anxiety disorders occur far too often in adolescents. Almost 32% of the adolescent population will suffer from some form of anxiety disorder by the time they turn 18.(25) Additionally, it appears females are twice as likely as males to suffer from an anxiety disorder between puberty and age 50.(26)

As mentioned earlier, the amygdala is not the only part of the brain that is supercharged and causes issues with the adolescent's thoughts, emotions, and behavior. The reward system presents its own unique set of problems.



# #5 The Reward System

## Risky Behavior



The reward system is a combination of several brain structures connected by a neural pathway. It is responsible for motivating and reinforcing behaviors that we find pleasurable – a *reward* of sorts (sugar, applause, drugs, praise, alcohol, sex, likes on social media, etc.).

Dopamine is the neurotransmitter that flows along this pathway and appears to be the reason we seek out something pleasurable (although it is not responsible for the pleasurable feeling itself).(27)

During adolescence there is a major increase in dopamine floating around in the prefrontal cortex.

This overabundance of dopamine causes adolescents to be hyper sensitive and drawn to any potentially pleasurable (fun, exciting, new, different, etc.) experience and makes these experiences even *more* pleasurable than at any other point in one’s lifetime.(28) This can be both good and bad for the adolescent.

This increase in reward system sensitivity fulfills the evolutionary role of helping the adolescent separate from parents, socialize to meet a partner, experience new things, and move closer and closer toward independence.

The reward system can be the impetus behind joining a youth or community service organization, going on a group ski trip, studying hard for a test, playing on sports team or joining the drama club. All of these things provide *rewards* of one kind or another, whether it's appreciation, applause, peer approval, friendship, or parental praise. Rewards such as these are normally considered *positive*.



Unfortunately, the reward system also motivates and reinforces exciting and pleasurable experiences that range from not so great (e.g., gaming, eating too much sugar, continuous social media scrolling, etc.) to downright risky and dangerous (e.g., reckless driving, drinking alcohol, experimenting with drugs, vaping, or smoking nicotine, having sex, talking to strangers online, jumping in the car with someone who's been drinking, etc.). Of course, all of these *rewards* would be considered *negative* - at least to parents.

So, we can see how a weak prefrontal cortex, lacking in the ability to use self-control and make good decisions, combined with a super hyped up reward system, can cause major issues for adolescents. The weak prefrontal cortex alone would cause enough problems for an average adult but an adolescent must contend with the additional pull of the reward system.

But wait, there's even more to throw in the mix. How adolescents view themselves also has an impact on their risk-taking behavior. Let me explain.



We begin developing a *sense of self* gradually from birth. Research shows that as young infants we can distinguish between ourselves and others – referred to as self-awareness. By age 2 or 3 we begin to understand that others are also self-aware, which prompts us to distinguish ourselves from others when we communicate.(29)

Self-awareness continues to develop throughout childhood at a steady pace and by adolescence, it is a central theme. As peers become an integral part of everyday life, our self-awareness becomes more relative to the views of these other people.(30) This focus on peers and their opinions, is a compelling factor in risky adolescent behavior. Why is this?



There may be several neurobiological reasons for the role peers play in adolescent risk behavior. First, we need to understand just how important peers are to an adolescent and which regions of the brain are involved. Scientists believe that a specific region of the prefrontal cortex (the medial prefrontal cortex) serves a distinctly separate purpose by networking with a handful of other brain regions to focus on social interaction and information – a sort of *social system*.

The neural circuits of the social system happen to overlap with those of the reward system. This overlap appears to help cast our peers in a central role when it comes to participation in rewarding yet risky behavior.

As we said, our whole identity hinges on what we believe our peers think of us. Everything we do and say, what we wear, how we speak, where we go, is all determined based on gaining peer approval. Our entire focus and self-identity is based solely on the opinions of other adolescents, who are totally consumed by the exact same thing.(31)

Not surprisingly, research indicates that adolescents place more emphasis on their peers' opinions than those of their own family members.(32) So, forget trying to convince them those shoes are still in style!

One particularly awful side effect of the brain's social system is that at around age 10 or 12, we become terribly self-conscious and embarrassed about *everything*. This feeling completely rules all our social interaction.

Research shows that adolescents are embarrassed just by the mere *thought* of being observed by others – especially peers.

This phenomenon is very prevalent up to around age 14 and literally causes us to change our behavior as if someone is always watching even when they're not. Unfortunately this often also prevents adolescents from participating in family-type activities even when peers aren't around (watch for telltale signs of the eye-roll and crossed arms!)







So when your 12-year-old suddenly turns you down for a game of catch on the front lawn, a bike ride through the neighborhood or even family game night in the basement of your own house, please understand it's not about you. Simply accept this behavior as another side effect of their changing brain.

Where is all this emphasis on peers going? Studies have continually shown that peer acceptance during adolescence is decisive not only in forming a sense of self, but in influencing the type and level of risk-taking and decision-making in which the adolescent engages.(33)

In fact, scientists theorize that receiving acceptance from peers is approximate to the reward received from using drugs and alcohol. (34) Think about that for a minute.

Peers' opinions are so critical that adolescents will automatically engage in behaviors that will elevate their status among them, without being persuaded or otherwise overtly influenced. In other words, "peer pressure" is something adolescents do to themselves as well.

This means adolescents are more likely to engage in the type of behaviors in which they know or believe their peers engage. For example, if their peers use alcohol, drugs or are sexually active, adolescents are more likely to engage in these types of risky behavior.

All of this is not to say that adolescents blindly jump into something without thinking at all.

As a matter of fact, it's been shown that when with or in front of peers, adolescents may weigh the risk of engaging in the rewarding activity and despite correctly estimating the probability of something going wrong, they decide to do it anyway because, in their mind, the benefit of the reward outweighs the risk.(35) This is truly the opposite of impulsivity - it is a calculated risk - and it shows the power of the reward system and combined with the social system.



The bottom line is that most risky adolescent behavior happens with or in front of other adolescents, *in the heat of the moment*. This has been shown to be even more true for boys.(36)

Trouble just seems to follow most often when adolescents are in groups - they are even more likely than adults to commit crimes when they are in groups.(37) Obviously, this makes guidance and supervision a must when two or more adolescents are present.





One well-known study conducted in 2011 clearly substantiated adolescents are much more willing to take bigger risks when other adolescents looking on. The scientists compared activation of the reward system and risk-taking behavior between adolescents and adults. The experiment was carried out using a simulated driving game which examined the subjects both alone and while their peers were watching.

The game challenged players to get to the finish line as quickly as possible; the faster their time, the more money they received as a reward. Along the simulated racetrack were stop lights which the participant could either ignore or observe.

Ignoring the stop light would of course, decrease their time and therefore increase their potential reward but also increase their risk of crashing and not making it to the finish line. On the other hand, observing the stop light would increase their time and decrease their potential reward but also decrease their risk of a crashing so they would be more likely to finish the game.

The study demonstrated not only that the adolescents' reward systems were much more active when they knew their peers were watching them, but that they also took greater risks to get the bigger rewards at the end of the track (i.e., they totally ignored the stop lights). The same was not true for the adult participants. Interestingly, the adolescents took no more risks than the adults *when they were not being watched by their peers.*(38)

The results of the driving game experiment were validated by a study conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in 2012. AAA examined data from years 2007 through 2010 to determine the statistical risk of car crash fatalities and police-reported car crashes, per mile, for 16 and 17-year-old drivers.

The study found, compared to driving without passengers, the driver's risk of death increased by a whopping 44% with one passenger under age 21; doubled with two passengers under 21 and quadrupled with three or more passengers under 21.

Alternatively, with an adult passenger present, age 35 or older, there was a 62% *decrease* in the risk of death to the driver and a 46% decrease in police-reported crashes.(39)







These studies do nothing to quell parents' fears about young drivers. In fact, they only confirm what most of us already knew in our gut; new drivers should not drive with other teens in the car. States have attempted to combat the problem with a graduated driver's license, but laws as to how many passengers are allowed, and other restrictions, vary.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Kids look forward to this rite of passage because it affords them greater independence and more opportunity for unsupervised social interaction with peers, both normal parts of adolescent development. Unfortunately, it is precisely this type of social interaction that amps up the reward system and increases risky behavior. As a matter of fact, compared to childhood, *an adolescent's chance of death increases by 200% due to risky behavior alone.*(40)

There are other risky behaviors that compound the driving problem. According to recent statistics from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, almost 30% of teens have had at least one drink of alcohol by age 15 and teen use of marijuana is the highest it has been in 30 years. As a matter of fact, kids today are more likely to use marijuana than tobacco with at least 19% of teen drivers reporting having driven under the influence of marijuana. Risky behaviors such as these are why accidents are the leading cause of death for adolescents in the US.(41)



Because adolescents are much more susceptible to the reward system than adults, they are also more vulnerable to addiction or addiction-like behavior.(42) Even seemingly innocuous and solitary activities such as playing video games, posting on social media, watching YouTube videos, scrolling Instagram, Snapchat, etc., can trigger the reward system and lead to behavioral issues.(43)

As researchers from UCLA and Temple pointed out in a 2018 study on social media feedback, “physical isolation is no longer necessarily social isolation”. Thanks to the internet, adolescents and adults alike can connect socially without being in physical proximity to others. Certainly we've seen this increase exponentially during the pandemic as in-person socializing turned to online socializing overnight.

This 2018 study indicated that both giving “likes” and receiving “likes” on social media utilizes overlapping circuits of the reward system in the same way as other motivational rewards. The researchers also mentioned that both seeking and receiving likes as well as providing likes to others has an evolutionary role in bonding with peers.(44)

As we've seen all too often, the internet and social media provides fertile ground for risky and dangerous adolescent behavior and now we know the reward system is at least partially to blame. As I sit editing this ebook, the news is reporting a Facebook livestream set up by a 27-year-old suspect before assaulting two Orlando police officers with a brick. Yes, he is over 25, but remember, 25 is not a magic number; genetics, environment, temperament, etc. all play a roll in the speed at which the synapses complete the programming process. Nevertheless, this is a good example of the dangers of social media and adolescents.

Additionally, don't forget, as discussed earlier, neuroplasticity enables the behaviors learned and repeated during adolescence to be reinforced through strengthening of synaptic connections, making it harder to break the behavioral cycle and easier to continue the behavior into adulthood.

So, what do we do about adolescents and all this reward-seeking and risky behavior? We educate them about the dangers, give them the statistics and teach them why they should modify their behavior, right? *Wrong.*

It turns out, education about the dangers and consequences of risky behavior is not the issue. Research shows that when adolescents are not in the heat of the moment (around their peers and presented with some rewarding experience), they are as capable as adults to make reasoned decisions and control impulses.

For example, one study found that 14-year-olds answered the same as any reasonable adult when asked whether certain activities were risky.(45)

But when presented with an opportunity, especially with friends around, knowing *how* to avoid risk is vastly different from *actually doing so*. As adolescence expert Laurence Steinburg, said it's "...an uphill battle against evolution and endocrinology..."(46)

Under *cool* circumstances, such as hypothetical situations presented in writing, in a laboratory setting, adolescents can and do respond appropriately and know what is and is not risky and what they should do in risky situations.

However, we know when adolescents are around their peers and the reward system is activated, their prefrontal cortex is generally not strong enough to stop them from engaging in risky behaviors.



This is why traditional education-based prevention programs do *not* work to prevent risky adolescent behaviors like substance use, reckless driving, and sex. Research has proven over and over again that such programs are totally ineffective and that some even *increase* risky behavior.(47)

So, if education doesn't work, what does?

Numerous scientific studies have indicated various public policy solutions for risky adolescent behaviors including; a) increased time in afterschool programs which decreases likelihood of drinking, drug use and sexual activity, b) later start times for school which increases student performance and decreases car crashes, depression and substance abuse, c) decreased density of stores selling alcohol which decreases underage drinking, d) raise the age to purchase cigarettes which decreases teen smoking, e) impose graduated driver's licenses that restrict teen passengers which greatly reduces teen car crash fatalities, etc.(48) Protecting adolescents from themselves in this manner is not only advisable but scientifically proven to help.

Obviously, the likelihood that all of these laws, regulations and policies will be enacted throughout the country at the state and local level is extremely low. And even if they were, all adolescent risky behavior can't be legislated away. What else then can we, as parents, do to insure our adolescent not only avoids becoming a statistic but also succeeds in life?

Research regarding traditional education-based prevention programs tells us these programs are not successful because they attempt to increase knowledge rather than address factors impacting the adolescent at a personal and individual level (e.g., poor emotion regulation, self-control, self-esteem and assertiveness).(49) Therefore, these studies say, we must teach kids these very basic life skills - the skills their weak prefrontal cortex has not yet mastered. Luckily, additional research proves it *can* be done.



Back in 1995, Daniel Goleman, author of worldwide best seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, wrote that most prevention programs are “the equivalent of solving a problem by sending an ambulance to the rescue rather than giving an inoculation that would ward off the disease in the first place”.(50)

He argued that while most prevention programs focus on disseminating information and lecturing young people about their risky behavior, they should instead be teaching emotional and social competencies.

It has been shown that children who, at an early age, develop social and emotional skills, persistence, confidence in their emotions, assertiveness, and the like, are much more resilient and therefore more likely to be able to handle all types of challenges.

With his book, Goleman brought the concept of emotional intelligence from academia (introduced in 1990 by researchers Mayer and Salovey) to the masses. He emphasized how indispensable it is to overall personal success and how, unlike IQ, emotional intelligence is teachable and quite attainable. Emotional Intelligence, he argued, could be broken down into 5 simple and teachable elements; a) emotional awareness, b) emotional regulation, c) motivation, d) empathy and e) social skills/relationships.



The idea that there was something more central to success than IQ was an intriguing and even hopeful idea that initiated a world-wide awakening of sorts. Since 1995, myriad books, scientific studies and peer-reviewed journal articles, blogs, websites, non-profit organizations and businesses have been dedicated to the subject of *emotional intelligence* – now, a buzzword that knows no bounds.

Corporations across the globe began to hire consultants to train employees in emotional intelligence, human resource departments give emotional intelligence tests to key personnel before hiring and schools have incorporated social and emotional learning or SEL into their curricula.

Emotional Intelligence is popularly known as EQ (emotion quotient), but is also referred to as soft skills, noncognitive skills, 21st-century skills, emotional literacy, emotional agility, and the like.

Additionally, various authors and researchers may include slightly different skills under the umbrella of EQ, depending on the field of study, etc. You may even recognize areas of overlap between EQ and character education, personality training, growth mindset, etc.

Over the years scientific research has continued into EQ regarding children and adolescents, both inside and outside the school setting with many scientists focusing their efforts on EQ's link to adolescent behavior and emotional health.

A plethora of scientific journal articles and research studies have indicated that, overall, higher levels of EQ equate to positive adolescent outcomes and lower levels of EQ equate to negative adolescent outcomes.

For example, a longitudinal study from 2010 examined the relationship between “emotional competence” and adolescent risk-taking behavior in a group of children, ages 9 through 16.

The results indicated a) lower levels of emotional awareness (being aware of your own emotions and being able to communicate them properly) and lower levels of emotional regulation (controlling and managing emotions) is highly correlated to a greater risk of “using hard drugs”, b) lower levels of emotional regulation is highly correlated to a greater number of sexual partners, and c) lower levels of emotional regulation and expression is highly correlated to “greater behavioral adjustment problems”. The authors of the study surmised, based on the findings, that risk-taking behavior during adolescence may be decreased by increasing emotional competence during childhood.(51)

Again, in 2010, a separate study investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence and mental health in high school students. Researchers specifically explored the areas of adolescent depression, social dysfunction, anxiety and somatic symptoms and found that lower levels of emotional intelligence were associated with these negative mental health issues.(52)

Similar studies have found associations between low levels of emotion regulation and involvement with the juvenile justice system(53), increased confrontational behavior(54), engagement in minor delinquent acts(55) and issues with anger, anxiety, depression, dissociation and posttraumatic stress.(56) The research leaves little doubt that children, adolescents, and adults fare much better in all areas of life if they have some higher level of emotional intelligence. To date, there are simply not enough schools incorporating SEL into their curriculum and not all those that do, are doing it well.

Our kids desperately need to develop these skills. And while every element of emotional intelligence is necessary for overall life success, it is imperative to the health, safety, and mental well-being of all adolescents to become more aware of and learn to regulate their emotions. These are the skills that will help our kids boost the power of their prefrontal cortex so it can jump in and take over from the amygdala and reward system.

# 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 the Speaking of Teens PARENT CAMP to 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



the podcast can be found on any podcast app like Apple, Spotify, Amazon, etc. or on the website at [SpeakingofTeens.com/podcast](https://SpeakingofTeens.com/podcast)



# End Notes

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# Emotional Awareness Strategies

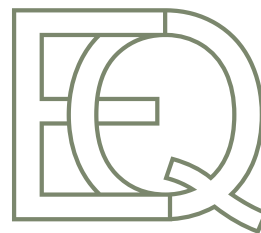
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A companion guide to episode #8  
of the Speaking of Teens podcast  
(available at [speakingofteens.com](https://speakingofteens.com) and on all major podcast players)

Ann Coleman, JD  
Parent Educator and Host, Speaking of Teens Podcast

Speaking  
of  
Teens

# It's so good you're here!



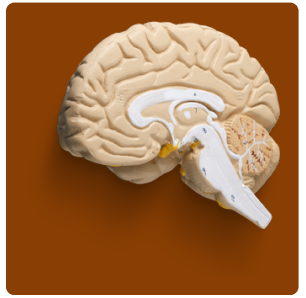
Emotional intelligence (“EQ”) is one of the most determinative factors in having a happy and successful life. And understanding or being aware of our own emotions, at the moment we’re experiencing them is the foundation of EQ.

Our emotions give us direction, tell us what to do next, how to solve a problem or motivate us to feel differently – it allows us to regulate or manage the emotion. So, being unaware of our emotions or only being slightly aware, leaves us guessing, confused, overwhelmed, and directionless.

For example, if you know you “feel bad” but don’t know exactly what that feeling means or what it’s telling you, maybe you decide you’ll feel better by having a candy bar or a milk shake. But in fact, you’re not hungry, you’re actually anxious about a phone call you need to make. Or, perhaps when your teenager rolls her eyes at you, you yell at her about being “disrespectful” and feel your face getting hot and want to shake her. But you chalk it up to a bad day at work that has you stressed out rather than the surge of anxiety you actually felt in that moment because of the way your father used to scream and then punish you when you “crossed the line” in that way.

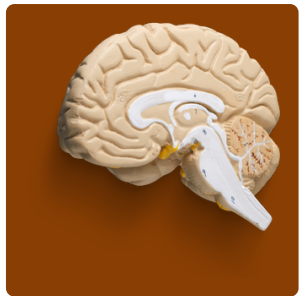
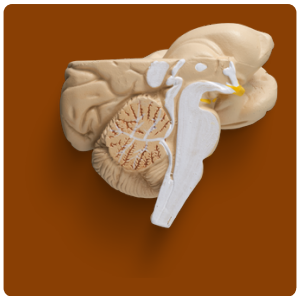
So, without a doubt, our own EQ impacts the way we parent our kids and as they move into adolescence it becomes even more important that we’re able to recognize and manage our emotions. The greater our EQ, the better our relationship is with them, the better adapted they are and the better their emotional development, mental health, and wellbeing.

**Disclaimer:** I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I’ve written in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child’s mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child’s pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder.



# Cognitive Distortions

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Cognitive distortions, negative self-talk, and automatic negative thoughts...it all means the same thing (as does the common description, “thinking traps”). We can blame these thoughts on that sometimes-nasty little inner voice that yammers at us all day long.

We may not even notice this voice most of the time, but it plays in the background in our brain and impacts our emotions and behavior, nonetheless.

You might have a particularly chatty and negative inner voice that points out all your shortcomings and failures all day long. But you probably only notice the emotion and the behavior that results from these negative thoughts.

Negative thoughts lead to unpleasant emotions, which lead to unpleasant behavior, which leads to more negative thoughts...it can quickly become a negative feedback loop leading to anxiety and depression.

Once you start noticing your thoughts – thinking about your thinking – you’ll begin noticing a lot of the things you tell yourself throughout the day. It’s all very “meta”, I know.

Obviously, this is not a phenomena shared only by adults. Adolescents are very prone to negative thoughts, which surely accounts for many of the mental health issues in our teens, tweens and “young adults”.

But in episode #8 of Speaking of Teens and this accompanying download, we’ll concentrate on how *your* negative thoughts impact both you and your teen.

You might notice that these cognitive distortions overlap quite a bit, and actually I think you could put them all in the jumping to conclusions category. It’s not that important to recognize the exact *type* of negative thought you’re having as much as it is to notice you’re having a negative thought that isn’t a fact – isn’t the truth - and isn’t part of you.



"It's not that important to recognize the exact type of negative thought you're having as much as it is to notice you're having a negative thought that isn't a fact"

## Jumping to Conclusions

As to you - You assume someone else is thinking negatively of you without any evidence that it's true. "She hasn't texted me back about lunch tomorrow. She must be trying to come up with a reason to skip it."

As to your teen - You assume you know what your kid is thinking or what they were thinking when they did something wrong. "He had to have left that dirty pot in the sink so his sister would have to clean it after dinner."

Or you assume you can predict their future based on current circumstances. "She can't remember to clean out her backpack weekly so there's no way she's every going to be organized enough to go off to college."

Many an argument have been caused by an assumption. You know what they say about assumptions right? So, why do we think we are so good at knowing what other people are thinking...especially our kids? We cannot possibly know without a conversation or tangible evidence. And since you're probably not a forensic analyst, I would suggest discussion over jumping to conclusions any day.



## Overgeneralization

As to you – You take one mistake, defeat, or negative event and turn it into an ongoing failure. “I didn’t get that contract after working on it for months. I’m not cut out for this job.”

As to your teen - You look at your teen’s one mistake, defeat, or negative event and turn it into an ongoing failure. “He got so nervous about that guitar solo; he forgot half the chords. He’ll never be able to be in the ensemble like he hoped”

This is negative thinking at its finest. Some of us just tend to be held back by our first defeat.

If you don’t want your teen to follow in your footsteps, you need to work on your own negativity and make sure you teach them that one defeat (or 10!) does not mean you give up on something you want.

If you don’t want your teen to follow in your footsteps, you need to work on your own negativity and make sure you teach them that one defeat (or 10!) does not mean you give up on something you want. You can stop short of believing in miracles but being defeated at the outset, always being willing to settle for less than what you want, is no way to go through life. This type of thinking can also prompt you to panic and overcompensate the first time your kid fails at something (get the extra lessons and hire the coach, etc.). One defeat doesn’t mean always *defeated*. Give it time and give them support and see what happens first.



## Catastrophizing

As to you - This is when you always expect the worst - a catastrophe - you believe something is worse than it actually is - a current situation or even something in the future. You use a lot of “what if” scenarios in your head. “This is the second time I’ve been over 10 minutes late this month, I just know I’m going to be fired!” You can see how this type of negative talk also makes you vulnerable to depression and anxiety.

As to your teen - This type of thinking is based on fear for your teen. You want the best for them, and you become hyper-aware of all the things that could go wrong for

them. You might have all these thoughts about things that went wrong for you or for someone else in your life. Or you watch the news, read blogs, listen to podcasts and it all weighs too heavily in our mind. You don’t want your kid to become a statistic of any kind. Your thoughts escalate, your emotions follow suit and before you know it, you’re freaking out on your teen and going to the extreme to make sure you avert the catastrophe in your head...which generally drives our teen to rebel.

## Mislabeling

As to you – This is the type of negative self-talk that makes you judge yourself and create this false image in your mind of who you are at your core. It's overgeneralization squared! Maybe you've decided you're a "social misfit" because you'd rather be at home working on a project that out with a group. Or maybe you've decided you're "not that bright" because you can't get the hang of spreadsheets! That's not enough data to make those global judgments.

As to your teen – I believe it's mislabeling, and unproductive to give your teen a negative label of any kind – even if they never know you think it. If you get it in your mind that your teen is lazy, unproductive, unmotivated, sloppy, unorganized, bossy, etc., it will have a negative impact on your emotions, behavior, and relationship with them.

First, examine the evidence: you're seeing them in one environment, at this particular age, in relation to you and your standards (which could even be higher than the norm – I'm just sayin'). Plus, kids don't always show their best attributes at home – they often save that for the outside world. And just because they look adult sized doesn't mean they're an adult yet. They are still learning and will be until at least their mid-20s! They have plenty of time to pick up on the attributes they need to live a great life. Just keep coaching and guiding and just don't judge.



## Should Statements

As to you - High standards, concrete rules to live by...maybe you were raised this way, or you've developed your own list of behavior rules. You have rules for yourself, your spouse, co-workers, your kids and you may not even realize it consciously. But if you often feel guilty about things you do or don't do or you stress over things you think you're constantly failing at (including parenting!), you're probably participating in the shoulds.

As to your teen - By the time your kid is in their tweens or teens, you've likely developed a standard parenting philosophy (could you be an authoritarian?) Along with that philosophy probably comes a lot of shoulds. Again, it's about these standards you've developed in your head that you expect your child to live up to. With social media came a

lot of these shoulds because of all those beautifully posed and produced photos of OPKs (other people's kids). Teenagers are not the only ones that fall victim to social media pressure! It's totally natural to see someone else and think "if they can do it why isn't my kid?".

But other shoulds just come straight from the recesses of our mind ("he should be able to study for 20 minutes without a break to play video games" "she should be able to go to the mall and look without begging to buy something" "he should have just told his friends to take him home before going to the party" "she should know better than to try vaping" "he should want to go with his friends to the game rather than sit at home watching it with his dad" "she should be able to understand this stuff after I've

explained it for more than 15 minutes now”). With these shoulds in mind, you then get annoyed, angry, frustrated, etc. that they actually cannot do what you think they should be able to. So, ask yourself, where do these standards come from? Who says? Why? And better yet, “So what?” Adolescents do the best they can with what their brain is allowing for them right now. Please believe it. Shoulds will yield you nothing but controlling behavior that will end up breaking the connection between you and your kid.

There are lots of cognitive distortions but those above are the ones I thought applied most to parenting teens. Following are a few more to consider. You may be able to think of a situation in which engaging in this negative thinking impacts your relationship with your teen. Give it some thought.

## **Disqualifying/Discounting the Positive**

Minimizing the positives about you or someone else (“Oh, their just being nice when they say I look good.”). You might have several positive comments on a post and one negative, and you focus on that one negative and just throw the positives to the side.

## **Mental Filter**

You focus on one negative and forget all the rest of the positives. So, if your husband said something totally obnoxious at the dinner party and you couldn’t get it out of your head and decided to never have another dinner party despite all the other great parties you’ve hosted together.

## All or Nothing Thinking

(aka black and white thinking or polarized thinking), this is when you can only see things at one end of the spectrum or another – no gray areas. If you don't do it perfectly, we are a complete and total failure. Using words like “always” and “never” are a clue (e.g., “I never get this right”).

## Emotional Reasoning

Letting your emotions decide how you interpret something. In other words, if you feel a certain way it must be true. It's basically when your emotions take over your reasoning. For example, you might feel stupid, so you're totally convinced that you have a low IQ despite the fact that you made straight-As all through high school and college and have a very good job. You still feel like you're dumber than everyone!

## Personalization

Thinking that everything bad that happens around you is somehow your fault or a direct reaction to you or something you did or didn't do. You blame everything on yourself – everything from the dog pooping in the house to your kid not having a good day at school. You also compare yourself to others constantly.

## Fallacy of Fairness

Thinking everything in your life should be fair for you. You then go through life feeling like you never get a “fair shake”. You're always measuring every situation against what you think is fair to you and end up feeling resentful and hopeless because even when things should go your way, they often don't.

## Fallacy of change

Expecting someone else to change if you try hard enough. Your happiness is wrapped up in them becoming what you want them to be. Usually found in relationships.

## Blaming

You think everyone else is always responsible for your pain or unpleasant emotions. You tend to say, “you make me feel” (fill in the emotion here!). This is simply incorrect. No one can make you feel an emotion. You are the only one controlling the emotion you feel.

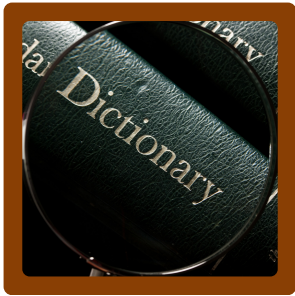
## Always being Right

Just as it says, you always think you’re right and will argue until the bitter end without caring about anyone else’s feelings in the process (even those you love).

It’s really difficult to examine our own thoughts and decide if we’re distorting things in any of these ways. It’s easier to look at someone else and figure out what *they’re* doing! But it can be transformative to realize, “Oh my gosh, I do that!”. That awareness then lets you work towards change. Noticing our thoughts is a major step towards emotional awareness and emotional regulation. Get to it!

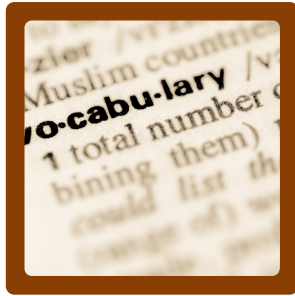






# Emotion Differentiation

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"It's been scientifically shown that the more specifically we can differentiate between our negative emotions, the better we are at managing those emotional moments."

For the most part, we have no problem dealing with our pleasant emotions. It's the unpleasant emotions we must pay attention to and try to regulate. The more intense the emotion, the more regulation needed.

For example, if you're a little nervous about an upcoming presentation at work, that's just good information to have. Being nervous tells you that you need to prepare and practice more to feel more confident. It's not something you need to manage or regulate really - it's just useful information and it gives you direction.

But if you're distraught that a friend is mad at you, that emotion tells you the friendship is very important to you and to do something to work it out. Additionally, because being distraught is an intense emotion, you must pay more attention to your actions, manage them better. Being aware of that, you can decide calmly what to say rather than crying and pleading for forgiveness.

The greater the level of intensity of an unpleasant emotion, the more important it is to be very aware of the specific emotion you're experiencing. That's because it's those intensely felt emotions that we need to be able to regulate better in that moment. And if we don't know what it is we really feel, not only do we not know what to do about it, but the less likely we'll be able to manage our response.

So, learning to be aware of and differentiate between whether you're just annoyed or are furious is critical to your emotional regulation. If you know you're furious you can take steps such as walk away for a minute, breathe, or think.

It's been scientifically shown that the more specifically we can differentiate between our negative emotions, the better we are at managing those emotional moments. So, gaining a deeper understanding of as many emotion concepts as possible is obviously paramount here. You need to develop your emotional vocabulary and learn as many words as possible for various emotions. Having these emotion words in mind will help you notice more when you actually experience these emotions.

Not only will more knowledge of emotion words help you personally, but it will help you when you're talking to your teen about their emotions. You'll be better able to help them label their own emotions and gain more awareness and regulation.

That's what the following vocabulary list with definitions is for! Review them closely and make sure you have these emotion words (and others) at the ready to be able to label both yours and your teen's emotions accurately. Start using them out loud to describe your emotions in front of your kids - they'll pick them up by osmosis. And when they have a hard time, help them by offering, "It sounds like you're totally exasperated with your teacher." or "I know how frustrating this is for you." You wouldn't believe how powerful that acknowledgment is to them - how much they will appreciate it and how far it goes in helping them calm down.

I know that memorizing "vocabulary words" seems like a meaningless task, but I assure you, I've read the studies and it's remarkable how this helps people regulate their emotions...just give it a shot. You can even tape them to the frig for the whole family!

## ANGER

**displeased** – just not pleased

**dissatisfied** – simply not satisfied

**annoyed** - any persistent (usually petty or small) thing that gets on your nerves

**aggravated** – synonymous with annoyed

**exasperated** – greatly annoyed or completely out of patience

**frustrated** – a feeling of disappointment over being unsuccessful at something

**angry** – worse than annoyed or aggravated and not as bad as furious

**furious** – extremely angry; blood boiling kind of anger

**impatient** – having no patience

**indignation** – a feeling of anger at something perceived as unfair

**seething** - intensely angry but not expressing it outwardly

**vengeful** – a strong desire to get back at someone for something they did to you



## SADNESS

**disappointed** – feeling of being deprived of something we planned for, expected, or anticipated

**discouraged** – the feeling of not getting the results we want

**glum** – A gloomy, ill-tempered, and melancholic feeling. Bummed; down; sullen; morose. Being glum shows in your actions and face more than mere sadness

**crestfallen** – type of sadness usually associated with getting sudden disappointing news like losing a ballgame or getting a bad review

**hurt** - emotional pain or distress usually caused by someone else's words or actions

**despair** (synonymous with hopelessness) – a deep feeling of having lost all hope

**depressed** – really, really sad and low– if it doesn't go away for a while, it could be diagnosed as psychological depression

**devastated** – to feel devastated is to feel completely destroyed or crushed - usually by some sort of horrible event or news

**grief** – intense sorrow, usually caused by someone's death (but we can feel grief due to the loss of a pet and even other huge losses in life)

**heartbroken** – to be so sad you feel like your heart will break apart - usually associated with losing a loved one or being dumped by a girlfriend or boyfriend, but many things can break your heart

## FEAR

**afraid** – reluctance due to fear of the consequences or worried that something bad may happen

**anxious** (synonymous with nervous, and worried) – remember that anxious can have two almost opposite meanings; a) uneasy and worried, or b) interested and eager to do something

**collywobbles** – that grumbling, bubbling, upset, anxious feeling that manifests in the pit of our stomach and is usually associated with outright dread (just for fun!)

**distraught** – upset, anxious and confused all rolled together

**jittery** – anxious or nervous with some restlessness or fidgetiness thrown in on top (tapping your pencil, bouncing your leg, pacing the room, etc.)

**horrified** – an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust – so you can be horrified because something really terrified you (someone screaming in your ear in the dark), horrified a little differently by something that was completely shocking (witnessing a terrible accident) or horrified by something totally gross, (opening a cabinet and finding a dead mouse)

**panic** – an overwhelming state of fear and anxiety; totally freaking out and can't think straight

**terrified** – as afraid as you can possibly be

**apprehension** – kind of a low-grade fear or anxiety about something, like the apprehension you feel about eating a strange food or approaching a stranger to ask a question. It's not quite worthy of the words, "anxiety" or "nervous" but it's enough to make you stop and think about it

## DISLIKE/DISGUST

**dislike** - simply not liking something or someone

**distaste** – a bit more than mere dislike - “I have a true distaste for people who brag about their money or possessions.”

**aversion** - a feeling of intense dislike for something. You can also call the object of this feeling, “an aversion”. So, you could say “I have an aversion to all yellow vegetables” or you could say “My aversions include yellow squash and yellow peppers.”

**disgust** – a strong feeling of aversion – to the point wanting to vomit!

**contempt** – feeling that someone or something is “beneath” you and not worthy of any respect whatsoever; as a matter of fact, to hold something or someone in contempt is to despise it/them

**hatred** – intense dislike

**animosity** – filled with hatred or ill will for someone

**hostile** – feeling opposition or dislike; unfriendliness

**loathing** – A feeling of intense hatred combined with a feeling of complete disgust

**repelled** - to cause distaste or aversion

**revulsion** – a strong feeling of aversion (but not going to get nauseous about it)

**disdain** – a feeling something is beneath you (similar to having contempt for something or someone)

## CONFUSED

**confused** – an unsettling state of being; unable to think clearly or act intelligently

**baffled** – confused by or even unapproving of something (you could be baffled by someone's behavior because you don't understand it, or because you disapprove of it).

**befuddled** (synonymous with bewildered) – Extreme and utter confusion to the point of complete puzzlement. You could be befuddled by someone else's behavior, your own feelings, or the weather

**irrational** – feeling or thinking something that is not reasonable or rational – or behaving in a way that is not reasonable

**doubt** – a state of feeling unsure about something; a lack of conviction

**disillusioned** – to learn later that something you thought was true, may not be

**hesitant** – the inability to act or decide quickly or with firmness

**insecurity** – uncertainty or anxiety about oneself; lack of confidence

**indifference** – If you feel indifference toward something you lack interest or concern about it; you don't care one way or the other.

**intimidated** – you can feel intimidated because you feel somehow “lesser than” the other person; that you're not as (wealthy, smart, tall, handsome, etc.)



## SHAME/EMBARRASSMENT

**ashamed** – feeling shame; being distressed or embarrassed by feelings of guilt

**self-conscious** - over-aware of being observed by other people

**embarrassed** – a feeling of self-consciousness when we do something that makes us look less than great in front of someone

**chagrined** – feeling a bit embarrassed and self-conscious, usually due to some sort of disappointment

**mortified** – extremely embarrassed (the kind where you wish you could just disappear into thin air!)

**humiliated** – mortified to the point of losing your self-esteem or self-respect

**flustered** – nervous excitement or confusion

**humbled** – brought down a peg or two; brought back down to earth, subdued and a little bit embarrassed.

**guilt** – sorrow or remorse caused by feeling responsible (although you may not be) for something you feel is bad or offensive

**regret** (synonymous remorse) - a feeling of sorrow or remorse for wrongdoing

**sorrow** - distress caused by grief, sadness, or regret



# Mindfulness

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Mindfulness is one of the single best ways to reduce stress and become more aware of and better at regulating emotions. Before reading further, I would love for you to watch this [TEDx \(Mile High Women\) Talk by Kristen Race](#) on mindfulness and parenting. She does an excellent job explaining the significance of mindfulness in the family and how to practice mindful breathing, mindful listening and mindful gratitude.

And if you need convincing on a scientific level or you're just interested in a bit of the neuroscience and how mindfulness meditation positively impacts the brain and our mental health, have a look at [this video](#) from University of California TV from April 2020. The UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness they mention in the video is an excellent resource for free live practice sessions. I'll give a list of additional resources at the end of the document.

There are many ways to practice Mindfulness but one of the most common is through guided mindful meditations like listening to an audio file of a meditation or even watching a video. These meditations can focus on relaxation, gratitude, emotion...but meditations that focus on the breath are the easiest and most accessible way to practice mindfulness.

Once you learn and feel comfortable you can always try it on your own without guidance (self-practice). As odd as this may sound to you right now, I can't tell you what a difference mindfulness has made in my life. It can literally be life changing for you, your kids and your spouse or significant other.

People often think of meditation as some guru sitting in a funky pose with incense burning while he chants. And some practices may include just that. But mindful meditation can be as simple as sitting in a chair and focusing on your breath for 1 minute. It's all about learning to simply be present in the moment with a non-judgmental attitude – that's it.

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In addition to meditation, we can practice mindfulness during everyday activities. If we slow down and really notice things we see, hear, taste, smell, or touch, we train the synapses in our brain to focus on one sense at a time. This mindful practice helps strengthen our prefrontal cortex, ultimately allowing us to manage our emotions better.

For example, mindful eating would include looking at the food, smelling it, noticing the texture of it in your mouth, how the flavor opens up as you chew, the taste in your mouth after swallowing, etc.

A mindful walk through the forest could include feeling the leaves and twigs beneath your feet, listening to the sound they make as you put one foot in front of the other, noticing the other sounds of the forest, noticing the colors of the leaves in the trees around you, listening to the number of different birds you hear, how the wind or air feels on your face, the smells in the air, etc. Obviously, this would mean leaving the phone at home!

If you'd like to read what a guided meditation might sound like before trying it, read on. I put this 2-minute guided meditation together for a group of teens in a focus group:

*Get into a comfortable position, either in a chair or on the floor.*

*If you're in a chair, sit up straight but comfortably - relax your back into a position that feels natural and place your feet flat on the floor.*

*Put your hands in your lap or on your thighs - whatever feels comfortable.*

*If you're on the floor, you can sit with legs crossed or put your legs out in front of you with your hands wherever they are most comfortable (in your lap, on your knees or on your thighs)*



*Bring your attention to your body as you sit still and straight, feeling the weight of your body on your chair or the floor.*

*Now move your attention to your breath – don't change how you are breathing. Just let yourself focus on your natural inhale and exhale.*

*Notice the air as it comes in through your nose and where you feel the sensation of breathing the strongest in your body. It may be your belly, your chest, nose, your throat.*

*(Pause for several breaths)*

*During this meditation, if you notice your mind wandering, that's fine and perfectly natural, just take note of it and then gently bring your focus back to your breathing without giving yourself a hard time.*

*The act of realizing your mind has wandered and bringing your attention back without criticizing yourself is central to the practice of mindful meditation.*

*Let's stay here for a short time in silence while you notice you're your breathing.*

*(Pause for several breaths)*

*Notice how your lungs expand and your chest rises as you inhale.*

*Place a hand on your belly and notice how your belly rises or expands as the air comes into your body.*

*(Pause for several breaths)*

*Again, if you get lost in thought, be kind to yourself as it happens to everyone – simply bring your attention back to your breathing.*

*Breathing in.....and out....*

*Open your eyes*

So, that's typically what you can expect in a guided meditation that focuses on the breath. No big deal, right? And remember, the whole practice is noticing when your mind wanders (because it always does) and bringing your focus back to the breath. It's the "practice" of noticing and returning your focus that helps us.

It's amazing what a profound difference something *so simple* can make in our lives. Please consider giving it a try today and see what you think.

*Resources on the following page.*

## Mindfulness Resources

If you want to learn more about mindfulness, the science behind it, the benefits and access free guided meditations, the [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#) has it all covered. You can download their app for guided meditations in the app store (search “UCLA mindful”) or access them at the website on your PC. I highly recommend the website to learn everything you need to know about mindfulness and the app is excellent!

UC San Diego also has a [Center for Mindfulness](#) and the website has guided audio and video and even free live practice sessions.

[InsightTimer](#) is a website with tons of good information and free videos regarding mindfulness, meditation, yoga, etc. Their app of the same name is highly regarded and apparently has 100,000 free meditations or a paid subscription. On the website they also feature live online events with expert speakers (likely for paid members but it looks great!)

[Healthline](#) has a great article that lists the Best Meditation Apps of 2021. My favorites are [Headspace](#) and [Calm](#).

Now, go out and try a little mindfulness meditation!!

# 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.

What's contained in this Guide are just some of things you'll learn in **PARENT CAMP** to 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



the podcast can be found on any podcast app like Apple, Spotify, Amazon, etc. or on the website at [SpeakingofTeens.com/podcast](https://SpeakingofTeens.com/podcast)







# Emotion Coaching

Coaching your teen through “emotional storms”

A guide to help you, help your teen learn how to be more emotionally aware and emotionally regulated (and decrease the amount of emotional dysregulation in your home!)

Ann Coleman, JD

Parent Educator and Host, Speaking of Teens Podcast

Speaking  
of  
Teens

# Why Learn To “Coach Your Teen Through Emotional Storms?”

## IT BUILDS THEIR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Over the past several decades, researchers have become convinced that a person with high “emotional intelligence” is more likely to experience overall life success than others (including those with extremely high IQs.)



Two of those skills are extremely important for teens’ and tweens’ wellbeing:

Emotional Awareness - the ability to recognize and articulate your emotions while you’re experiencing them and to recognize emotions in other people.

Emotional Regulation - the ability to manage your emotions or express them in a productive manner, rather than letting your emotions control you.

The problem is, these skills are sorely lacking during adolescence. So, it’s our job to help them with this - and the best way is to learn how to coach them through their emotions as discussed on the following pages.

NOTE: To learn more about emotional intelligence and emotion coaching, listen to Speaking of Teens episodes [6](#), [78](#), and [95](#)

# EMOTION COACHING IS THE KEY TO PARENTING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT KIDS

Psychological researcher, Dr. John Gottman, and his team, conducted research on parents and children for a decade in the laboratory. They discovered that children of parents who did some very specific things had much better outcomes. They termed what they witnessed, “Emotion Coaching” and found that these kids grew up to be “emotionally intelligent” adults. They were able to regulate their own emotions better, relate to other people better and had more positive lives overall (better relationships, academic success, mental health, etc.)

On the following pages I’ve broken down the elements of emotion coaching to simplify the process for you. I’ve also explained a few other principals that will help get this right.



**Disclaimer:** I am not a mental healthcare provider and nothing I’ve written in this Guide should be taken as advice regarding your child’s mental health. I have researched and interpreted the information contained in this Guide from various credible resources including scientific journal articles. Please consult your child’s pediatrician or mental healthcare provider if you suspect they may have an emotional or mental health issue or disorder.



# BECOME MORE AWARE OF YOUR TEEN'S EMOTIONS



From around age 10 or 12 until the mid-20s, the adolescent brain goes through a major phase of brain growth – similar to the first 3 years of life (they're very similar to giant toddlers really!)

This growth has a *huge* impact on their thoughts, emotions and behavior. They think more negatively, they react more emotionally and they do more risky things. This is not their fault. They are not doing it on purpose. They're doing the best they can with the brain they have at the moment. So, they need your help learning to be more emotionally aware and regulated.

I urge you to take the time to learn more about your teen's brain so you can become more empathetic, which will help you as you try to regulate your own emotions. *Listen to episodes 3 and 4 of **Speaking of Teens**.*

Also, begin to pay close attention to what makes them angry, annoyed, sad, frustrated, nervous, etc. What time of day is it more likely to occur? What tips you off prior to a meltdown? *Become more aware of their emotions.*

# SEE THEIR OUTBURSTS AS OPPORTUNITIES

Don't try to avoid their unpleasant emotions. Don't try to distract them, fix their mistakes or give them advice (unless they ask, and even then, tread lightly!)

Unpleasant emotions are unavoidable for *all* of us and your teen can handle them with your help. This is part of developing emotional intelligence. They must learn to accept their feelings and move forward (with your help.)

Remember their outbursts or meltdowns are literally *a cry for help*, and are an opportunity to *deepen* your emotional connection with them and to *help them* become more emotionally intelligent. Repeat this to yourself: **“When they’re at their worst is when they need me the most!”**

Just imagine them as a toddler again - that’s what you’re dealing with right now!



# REGULATE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS



It's critical for your teen and your relationship with them, that you get a grip on your own emotional responses to their behavior, if you haven't already.

Journaling is scientifically shown to improve emotional awareness and regulation. When you have an emotional encounter with anyone (especially your teen), journal it. Write down the circumstances, what you were thinking, what was said, etc. Get curious about your own emotions, think about connections to things in your past, how you were raised, etc. You'll soon begin spotting patterns.

Mindfulness meditation is another scientifically proven method to help with your emotions. Listen to episodes [65](#) and [96](#) of the ***Speaking of Teens*** podcast for more information about mindfulness. There are a multitude of apps, books and blogs that can help you to start a mindfulness meditation practice. It's honestly one of the best things you can do for your overall mental health.



# CHECK YOUR PARENTING STYLE

We all gravitate towards a particular “parenting style”, all of which are categorized by the amount of control a we exert over our kids.

The most controlling style is called **authoritarian** (aka, “my way or the highway” parenting style), which has been shown by volumes of scientific research to be horrible for kids and teens. Authoritarians are all about the parent’s authority and the kid’s *obedience*, not a warm, loving relationship.

At the other end of the spectrum is the **permissive** parenting style which lacks much, if any, control over the child and the **uninvolved** style, which is basically, neglectful parenting. These styles, too, have been shown to be harmful and not in a child’s best interest.

For decades, scientific research has shown that the **authoritative** parenting style is best for a child. This style is a balance between firmness and kindness.

*NOTE - To determine your parenting style, you can take Psychology Today's comprehensive test [here](#).*



# CONNECTION BEFORE CORRECTION



In an emotionally charged moment, it's so important to connect with your teen before even *thinking* about correcting their behavior. Whether they're emotional already or they're not but you realize you need to correct their behavior in some way (or say something they're not going to like)...connection is first. If they're emotional, you're going to learn to help them calm down. If you just need to correct something they've done or not done (a "mistake" they've made) you'll need to find a way to make a connection first (example to follow.)

If you try to scold them when they're upset or before you've made a connection, the end result is an argument, power struggle, more intense emotions - in other words, it will only make matters worse. Force yourself, for the moment, to forget the "lesson" you want to teach or the scolding you'd like to do.

If you jump in and correct them when they're upset or you jump in and correct them without making a connection first, *they won't hear a word you say*. All of your correcting will be in vain. Wait until the storm has passed. You could even wait until the next day, but at least wait until everything has settled down.



# FIND YOUR EMPATHY FOR WHAT THEY'RE GOING THROUGH

During emotionally charged moments, step into your teen's shoes. Actually, imagine *thinking* with their *brain* (don't forget to go to episodes 3 and 4 and learn about their brain!) They cannot think rationally the way we do. They have little self-control and cannot make great decisions yet. Don't make the mistake of attributing the way *you* think to your teen.

Also remember that your teen is experiencing incredible amounts of stress from school, social media, their concerns about issues like climate change and social justice, plus the impact of COVID is *still* lingering for them. Teen mental health has never been worse. **THEY ARE STRESSED.** So, just remember that.

For example, let's say you've tried to get your son on the phone for the past two hours. You know he went to the beach with friends, but you're fretting and getting more stressed out by the minute. In the meantime he's just enjoying the beach with friends and has no idea his phone died. So, when he walks in the door, you're ready to pounce...but you put yourself in his shoes and remember to connect before you correct.



In this case it might sound something like this:

"You must have had fun at the beach, it looks like you got a little sun on your face." (as you reach over and pat his head or touch his nose)

*"I had a great time!"*

"I'm so glad, I really like all those guys. Did you catch some good waves?"

*"Yeah, we did. The storm really gave us some giant rides. I'm glad I met them, we have a lot in common."*

"That sounds awesome, we'll have them over here really soon for pizza or something."

*"Maybe after the game next weekend."*

"Sure. (pause) Listen, I'm sure you didn't realize it but I tried to call you for a while to see if you'd pick up your sister and apparently your phone was dead."

(looking at his phone) *"Oh wow, I didn't even realize. Sorry about that."*

"I understand. I know you weren't thinking about your phone and I'm so glad you had fun. It *does* worry me when I can't reach you though. I'd really like it if, when you know you're going to be away from a charger or your car for a long time, you'd make sure your phone is fully charged before you go...just in case I need to reach you or you have an emergency. Sound good?"

*"Sure, I can do that."*

(hugging him) "Thank you."

No arguing, no yelling, no consequences necessary. It's amazing what a little change of attitude, some patience, a recognition of your own emotions, and simple semantics can do for the level of peace in a home!

**WOW**

# PROVIDE A GENTLE TOUCH



If it's appropriate in the moment, one thing you can do to *connect* and help your teen or tween calm down is to give them a gentle touch on the arm or back or even a hug. This has been scientifically shown to flood the recipient's brain with oxytocin and helps release other positive hormones like dopamine and serotonin. These chemicals help counteract the stress hormones like cortisol and will provide that little buffer to help them calm down, if already upset. It can also smooth the way for a correction that's just around the corner.

Obviously, you need to be able to "read the room!" There are many situations where a touch of *any kind* could cause them to recoil or even intensify their emotions. This is why you need to be as aware as possible of your teen's emotions.

Start looking for cues when their upset and if you attempt to rub their back or touch their shoulder and they don't want you to, you'll certainly know right away. The point is, to bring calm and make that connection. Get to know your teen's needs during emotional moments so you can do both.



# LISTEN TO THEM INTENTLY

We talk to or *at* our teens constantly. We remind, instruct, advise, ask, lecture, correct...all the time. But talking isn't the key to good communication - listening is.

And most of us *suck* at listening to our kids. We listen more intently to our friends, boss, and co-workers.

When our teen is emotional or we need to bring something up that will likely cause them to *become* emotional, our job is to listen and empathize.

Set aside your own agenda, what they've done wrong (if anything) and *listen* to what they're saying. Don't interrupt, but get curious. Ask questions to help figure out what they're feeling if you need to.

You'll learn what not to say and what to say instead in the next sections.





# AVOID INVALIDATING THEIR EMOTIONS



We *invalidate* our kids' emotions when we say things like, "calm down", "You don't like him anyway", "It'll be fine", or "You won't remember this after high school". We do the same when we give them unsolicited advice (e.g., "You should just ignore them", or "I'd just do the same thing to them").

We don't mean to make them feel worse. Most of us grew up with our parents doing the same thing to us - it feels natural. Maybe we don't like seeing our teens angry, nervous, or sad, or maybe we see their emotional display as manipulative, or spoiled. Perhaps we see them as selfish, dramatic or over-the-top. But now that you understand their brain, (don't forget those episodes!) you should be able to banish these thoughts, right?

When we invalidate their emotions, we show them we *don't* understand, we're telling them they're silly, stupid or wrong for feeling what they feel.

Invalidation leads to more emotion as they kick it up a few notches to convince us they have a right to feel however they feel!

# VALIDATE, REFLECT, GIVE THEM AN EMOTION WORD

Of course, the opposite of invalidating their emotions is to validate or acknowledge them. Let them know they have a right to feel any way they feel (it doesn't matter what you think they *should* feel.)

You've listened, empathized, asked curiosity questions, so you probably know what emotion they're experiencing. And since teens are not very emotionally aware, it's your job to help them explore and put a label on what they feel. They may know they feel *bad*, but not realize which *bad* feeling it is (annoyance, fury, agitation, grief, fear, etc.)

Validating their emotion can sound something like, "I see how *annoyed* you are right now." They'll let you know if you're not right.

Even if the emotion is in response to something you've said or done, you can do the same thing. For example, "I understand your frustration. I love those shoes too. I want you to have them, but we'll have to wait until next Friday when you get your allowance." Sometimes, you can validate their feelings by just using one word (e.g., "Wow" or "hmmm").



# NUDGE THEM TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM



Once they know how they feel, they must decide what to do about it. Fight the urge to give advice or take charge and fix the problem for them. They only need a bit of guidance.

If your daughter's angry because a teacher gave her a lower grade than she thinks she deserves: She could stay quiet, do things differently the next project, or talk to the teacher about changing the grade.

You can't decide this *for* her but you can guide the conversation to allow her to come up with and explore these options on her own. Listen more than you talk. Ask questions. Give hints. But allow them to get there as independently as possible (even if they ask your advice).

Our goal is to help them learn how to regulate their emotions, to manage them and know what to do with them. But it's not our job to solve their problems, fix their mistakes or give them unsolicited advice.

Mistakes happen and they're the best way to learn and grow. If they're not allowed to resolve their own mistakes or problems, they'll be at a huge disadvantage in life.

# Your "Cheat Sheet" for Emotionally-Charged Moments With Your Teen

- ♥ Repeat to yourself, "Connection before Correction" and set aside correcting their behavior for the moment
- ♥ Stay CALM. Breathe, remind yourself they need you to help them get through this
- ♥ Remember that their brain causes intense emotions with very little rational thinking - that's why they need you!
- ♥ Imagine yourself in their place, at their age, in this situation...*empathize* with them - it will help you connect better in the moment
- ♥ Remember a gentle touch goes a long way to help calm them (if appropriate in the moment)
- ♥ Listen and ask questions so you can really understand and show them you "get it"
- ♥ Let them know their emotion is valid by providing a name for it (e.g., "I know you're *frustrated* with the homework today.")
- ♥ Sit back and *guide* them through fixing their own mistakes
- ♥ When all is calm you can *then* discuss any problems with their behavior (e.g., "Next time, please call me and let me know what's going on.") - remember kind and firm rather than harsh and stern



# YOU CAN DO THIS!

I know this is a lot - especially if you've never heard any of this before. If you'd like more guidance, together with weekly meetups with me, monthly Q & As with guest experts and being in a community with like-minded parents, then be sure to check out [PARENT CAMP](#).

It's never too late to have a better relationship with your teenager. Positive change *is* possible.



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# COMMUNICATION FOR COOPERATION

for parents of teens  
and tweens



Ann Coleman, JD  
Parent Educator and Host, Speaking of Teens Podcast

Speaking  
of  
Teens

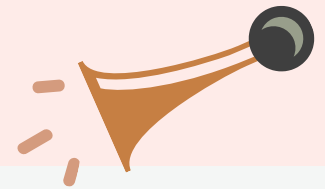


# Laying the Groundwork

## 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.

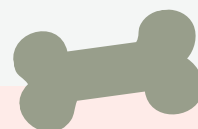
The bottom line is, our teens and tweens are at the mercy of their changing brain and we must understand, be empathetic, and help guide their behavior rather than blaming or punishing them.



## #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.

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## #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.

"The main way our teens and tweens gauge our respect for them is by our reaction to their need for autonomy..."

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

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## #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

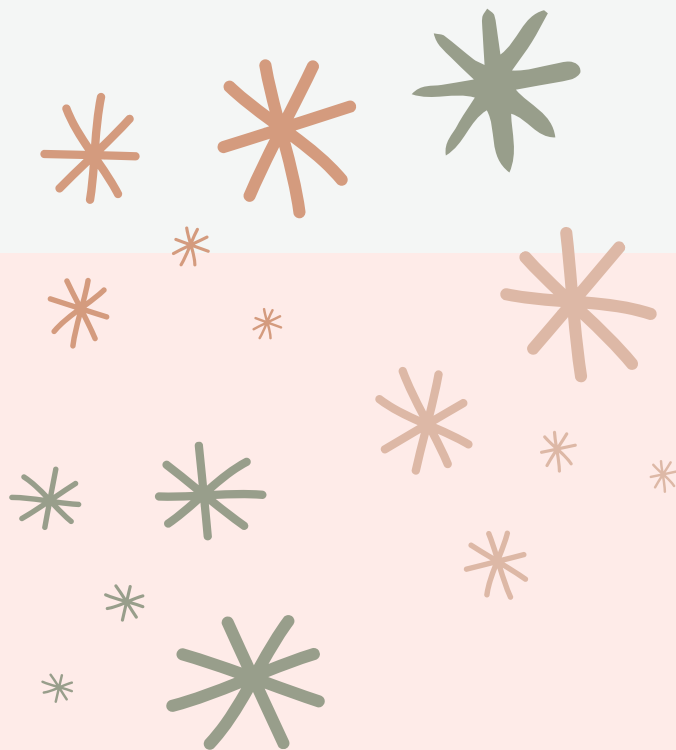
Apologizing to our teens when we've yelled or stepped over the line is something we may overlook too often but it's so important to any relationship, especially between us and our kids.

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.*

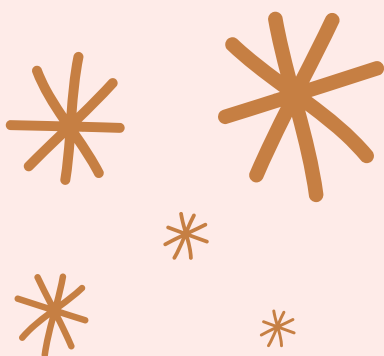


## #1 State the issue

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*



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