

Keep the Relationship the Main Thing

By Nicole Schwarz, MA, LMFT

Parents of teenagers have a hard job. They have to walk a fine line between giving enough advice to keep their kid on the right track and letting their teen make decisions on their own. And if that wasn't difficult enough, they have to deal with the ever-changing rollercoaster of emotions and backtalk dealt by their teen.

Teens are going through a period of uncertainty and radical growth and change. They are struggling to find their own identity and make their own decisions, while still wanting to be the little child, babied by their parents. Parents are also going through a period of uncertainty. They struggle to figure out their role with their teen. No longer are they needed to help with zippers, tying shoes, or multiplication tables. What is their role now?

Parents – don't despair! Through all of the backtalk, bad decisions, and name-calling, the most important question to keep in mind is: Will this enhance our relationship or detract from our relationship? In other words: **Keep the relationship the main thing.**

This may not be the easiest advice, but research shows that teens who report having a good relationship with their parents make better decisions, have less legal trouble, and have fewer unwanted pregnancies. So, next time your teen comes in late or starts whining, "Awww mom, you're so MEAN," **focus on the relationship.**

1. **Don't go with your first reaction.** More than likely, your first reaction will be yelling, possibly name-calling, or giving a consequence you cannot enforce. Instead, take a deep breath, stop for a few seconds before you respond.
2. **If you have to give a consequence, state it simply without lecturing** about the foolishness of your teen's choice or getting into an argument about what is "fair." Instead, say, "you came home after curfew, so you will not have access to the car next weekend." If you are thinking about the relationship, you may want to add, "I'm glad you're home; I love you. Good night."
3. If you're being called a name or your child is responding with "fighting words," **stand your ground. Remind yourself that you are an adult.** Mature adults do not respond like children. There may be a million mean or spiteful things that run through your brain, but refusing to verbalize them sets a good example for your teen. Instead, respond with, "Hmm, I can hear that you are frustrated by that decision." Or "I want to hear your concern, but let's talk about this later after you've had time to calm down."
4. **If your child did make a bad decision, engage him or her in the processing.** Many parents feel the need to lecture their teen about their choices. It is natural to do so when children are young; they need to learn about the dangers of playing in the street or talking to strangers. However, to prepare your teen for independent decision making, it is important for them to do the thinking. Instead of lecturing, say "Failing that test was a bummer; it's disappointing that you can't play in Friday's game. What is your plan to improve your grade in English so you can play next week?"

It is not easy to maintain your cool and know the right thing to say at all times. Teens can change their mind – and their attitude – multiple times an hour. It's ok to admit that you didn't handle things well previously or apologize for yelling when you should have listened. What is important is salvaging the

relationship. It is not about being right or having the last word. It is not about “teens these days being more disrespectful than you were as a teen.” It is about learning to communicate with your child in a way that is respectful, and that says — either verbally or in so many words — “I love you. And I’m here to support you through this time of excitement and uncertainty.”

If you could use help building or repairing the relationship with your child, please contact Nicole Schwarz, MA, LMFT at River City Clinic at 651-646-8985, or visit her website at www.NicoleSchwarzCounseling.com.