

STRESS

taking charge

Sources of Conflict

- Curfew
- Homework
- Chores
- House rules
- Amount of freedom
- Talking back
- Swearing

For Further Reading
Pm 1547h, Keeping Young People
Out of Trouble

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File: Family life 3

... and justice for all
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Managing Conflict with Teens

Rick and Jan are having a hard time with 15-year-old Brandon. He has a bad temper and arguments with him are really difficult. It doesn't seem to matter how hard they try, they can't get him to calm down and be reasonable. They love Brandon but don't know how they can get through the next few years of conflict with him.

Conflict between parents and teens is normal. As teens become more independent, question their parents' rules, and spend more time with peers, many families have disagreements. However, the conflict in some families with teens is severe. Instead of waiting until the problems are really big, decide to start now on finding ways to manage disagreements with your teen. The effort you put into learning ways of lowering levels of conflict will pay off in a happier, more peaceful family.

Stop Arguing

Dad: "Time for homework, Alex." Alex: "C'mon, Dad, I'm in the middle of a show." Dad: "You know you have to get it done." Alex: "I'll do it later." Dad: "You'll be too tired later." Alex: "No I won't. I'll get it done." Dad: "That's what you said last night ..."

It's hard to win when you start arguing with a teen. He or she can probably think of an answer for everything you say. Worst of all, arguing can lead to serious fights and family conflict. Instead:

- Let teens know you heard their point. (Dad: "Uh-huh." "I heard you." "Anything else?")
- Use the words "regardless" or "nevertheless." (Dad: "Nevertheless, it's time for homework.")
- Don't give in. If you give in after your child argues with you, you are teaching him or her to argue next time!
- Stay clear of a power struggle. Don't try to convince your teen that you are right.
- Say, "I know you don't like it, but the answer is 'no.'"
- Say, "I'm not going to argue," and walk away.

Going from Bad to Worse

Mom: "Please turn down the stereo, Jenny." Jenny ignores her. Mom (yelling): "Turn down that stereo this minute **or else**." Jenny: "Oh leave me alone!" Mom: "You're so selfish! If you don't turn it down this minute, I'll rip the cord out." Jenny: "You old hag! I hate you!"

When parents fight with kids, behavior goes from bad to worse. Tempers rise and threats, swearing, and physical fights can happen. Parents and teens both feel angry and hurt. Worst of all, each fight damages good feelings and makes the next fight more likely. If the parent wins, the teen will find a way to win next time. Instead:

- Do not use negative labels (e.g., selfish, lazy, irresponsible).
- Decide ahead what the rule is. (No loud stereo.)
- Speak in a quiet, low-pitched voice.
- Stop the behavior before things get worse. (After the first warning, Mom should turn down the stereo herself.)
- Leave the room when tempers rise.
- Calmly remove a privilege. (Mom could quietly unplug the stereo or take it out of the room if her request is ignored.)

Using a Point System

Many parents find that their teens try harder to get along when they earn points for good behavior. By spending only a few minutes a day, parents and teens can record points so that teens earn privileges and rewards. For many difficult teens, using points for good behavior works better than consequences or punishment for bad behavior. A point system helps most families gradually learn to get along better.

Steps in Setting Up and Using a Point System

1. Parents decide on two or three specific teen behaviors that cause problems (e.g., not doing homework, coming home late, not doing chores, talking back, fighting).

2. Make a chart with weekdays across the top and specific behaviors down the side. Instead of writing, "Not doing homework," write the positive behavior, "Doing homework right after supper."
3. Tell teen that you will help him or her improve the problem behaviors by giving points and rewards.
4. With the teen, decide on several privileges or rewards he or she would like to earn. Rewards need to be something you can afford and something the teen can earn points for each day he/she follows the rule or performs the chore.
5. Decide how many points the teen can earn for a certain behavior or chore. Easy chores get fewer points than hard or unpleasant chores. Behavior that's hard to change gets more points than easier changes.
6. Keep track of points each day and give rewards for points each week.
7. Decide how many points will earn a reward or privilege. Aim for 75 to 80 percent of the total points. **NO ONE IS PERFECT**, especially teens.
8. Do not argue or lecture about points.
9. After a problem has improved, take it off the list and add another.
10. You may decide to take points away for back talk or swearing.

Suggestions for Privileges or Rewards

Some privileges that might work are having a friend stay over night, having a later curfew for one night, having more time on the phone, using the family car, or having someone else do a chore for a day. Rewards might be clothing that costs more than you usually spend, movie rental, a gift certificate for fast food, a ticket for a sports event or concert, or extra spending money. For big problems, like getting poor grades, reward small steps toward improving, like spending 30 minutes doing homework. Don't wait to reward until the grades have improved. If fighting between brothers and sisters is a major problem, give points for a half hour or hour of no fighting.

Keep Your Teen "Hungry"

At 17, Eric gets most of what he wants on his own. He has a part time job from which he earned enough to buy a car and get things like fast food, movies and CDs. He doesn't really depend on his parents for anything except meals and a place to stay. They find it hard to get him to cooperate.

You can have a more positive influence on teens if they still need you for some of their needs and wants. Once they have their own car and spending money, it's hard for parents to give rewards and privileges. Teens may not see much need to to what the folks want.

- If teens have their own car, keep the right to take away driving privileges.
- If teens work a part-time job, require them to save some of the money.
- Give them chores around the house even if they are working.
- Use the point system to reward good behavior.

Build a Positive Relationship

Teens do better and try harder to please parents when they're getting along with parents. If they think parents are down on them, that parents don't trust them, or that parents see them as nothing but trouble, then teens don't have much reason to do what parents say. When relationships are filled with good times and teens know that parents care, they usually try to please.

- Look for good behavior and give specific compliments. (*Dad: "The lawn looks great. I like the way you trimmed around the trees."*) Do **not** give a double-loaded compliment like, "*You did a good job on the lawn but you forgot to put the mower away.*")
- Praise for what the teen did *right* even if the job wasn't perfect.
- Set a family time each week and encourage teens to take part. (*Mom: "Let's go out for pizza on Sunday night."*) During family time, no put-downs, criticisms, or discussion of problems.
- Let teen give ideas for family activities.
- Give rewards or privileges for good behavior. (*Mom: "Thanks for coming home on time. You can use the car on Friday night."*)

- Listen to their point of view without criticizing.
- Spend one-on-one time. (*Dad: "Want to go out for an ice cream? You can tell me about the game."*)
- Show your child by example how to handle anger. The more you show your teen respect, the more likely he or she will be respectful in return.

Learn Your Own Warning Signs

Sherry was learning to control her anger with her daughter, Chris. She had found out the hard way that things only got worse when her own anger was out of control. When her daughter started arguing or became demanding, Sherry discovered that she could feel her stomach tightening. Instead of waiting until her heart was pounding and she was full of anger, she would now tell Chris, "I'm getting upset and I need to cool down. We'll talk about it later."

It's natural to get angry at our teens when they are hostile or demanding, call us names, or swear. But it's up to us as parents to manage our own feelings and stay in control. It helps to figure out what situations trigger our anger and find ways to handle it.

- Count to 10 (or 100).
- Breathe deeply.
- Leave the room or go for a walk.
- Call a friend on the phone.
- Go in your room to cool down.
- Remind yourself *you're* the adult.
- Say, "*We'll talk about it later.*"

If Violence Is Threatened

A small percent of teens become so out of control that they threaten or carry out violence against a family member. Parents should call the police if their teen becomes violent; then go to a safe place, preferably a room with a lock. If a violent teen knows that you will call the police, he or she may learn to better control violent outbursts. Families in which violence from a teen is a continuing problem need help from a counselor and from law enforcement officials until the teen can learn to control his or her anger.