




How To Have Difficult Conversations With Your Tween or Teen

*SO THAT YOU GET YOUR POINT ACROSS
& CREATE A CLOSE PARENT-CHILD BOND*



Twenty years of research involving more than 100,000 people reveals that the key skill of effective leaders, teammates, parents, and loved ones is the capacity to skillfully address emotionally and politically risky issues. Period.

~ *Patterson, Grenny, McMillian and Switzler from their book **Crucial Conversations***

INTRODUCTION

In my experience, one of the trickiest skills for a parent to develop is the skill of communicating an important message to their child while still maintaining a positive parent-child relationship.

Think about it: How many times have you had a difficult conversation with your child and one - or both of you - ends the conversation with their feelings hurt?

Or maybe the difficult conversation ended with yelling, name-calling, or hurtful judgements.

Worse yet, many of the important conversations we must have with our kids involves a lot of emotions. When this happens, it's very difficult for the child to really HEAR what we want to get across to them. When our kids feel attacked, judged, and/or not liked, it's as if they turn off the listening parts of the brain and hyper focus their energy on arguing the opposite side of what we're trying to get across to them.

The point of this article is to explain where most parents fail at having difficult conversations with their teenagers. Psychological science has identified several key communication techniques that many well-meaning Modern Parents use, but don't work. Want to know what DOES work? Later in this article, I'll teach you several effective strategies to use when having difficult conversations with you teenager that actually serve to make your teenager listen to you AND build a close parent-child bond.

But before you implement any new communication techniques, you'll first need to be able to identify what make a conversation critical - and what mistakes most parents are making that contribute to miscommunication, hurt feelings, and/or a damaged parent-child relationship.

● RETREATING VS COMPETING ●

So what are critical conversations? These occur when a parent and child have a conversation where lots of emotions are involved.

The following are examples of common parent-child critical conversations:

- Talking about why your child got a bad grade
- Discussing why you don't want your daughter to go out with her boyfriend past 10:00pm
- Listening to your son tell you that they don't think the other kids like him at school
- Confronting your child about the cigarettes you found in their car

Sometimes conversations can start out as a normal, non-emotional conversation and quickly turn into a critical conversation. You know this is happening when all of a sudden you feel dread, anger, nervousness, and/or annoyance about continuing the conversation.

Most parents react in one of two ways when confronted with a parent-child critical conversation: they either retreat or compete. I'll admit that when I must have a critical conversation with one of my kids, my gut reaction is to retreat - to avoid having the conversation altogether.

Retreating solves the immediate problem, right? It gets the parent out of the uncomfortableness of having the conversation - but it's not effective in the long run. Avoiding critical conversations on a regular basis only serves to ignore a family problem and degrades the closeness of the parent-child relationship.

● RETREATING VS COMPETING ●

On the other hand, competing is just as ineffective. Instead of retreating, some parents tackle the critical conversation head on by focusing on “winning” the conversation. When this happens, intense emotions cause both parent and teen to stop listening to the other person, and what needs to be communicated never gets across.

Instead of retreating or competing, the smart thing to do is to have the difficult conversation using strategies that help us gain the courage to have the conversation while keeping the emotional level low so that both parties don’t instinctively feel like they have to defend themselves.

When we focus on defending our point of view, then we don’t leave much cognitive ability to listen to the other person.

But before the Modern Parent can begin using effective critical communication strategies, they need to set up an environment that decreases the teen’s instinctive need to defend themselves and increases their ability to see their parent’s point of view.

HOW PARENTS SET THEMSELVES UP FOR CONVERSATION FAILURE

In order to have a constructive conversation with a teenager, we must set up a safe environment for them. When they feel safe, then they are more likely to see the parent's point of view - they won't feel the instinctive need to defend their own point of view.

So where are most parents going wrong?

The fight or flight process automatically handicaps clear thinking. When teens enter into critical conversations with parents, their biology automatically switches on the fight or flight mechanism.

When humans experience danger or stress, the sympathetic nervous system kicks into high gear - this is the fight or flight response. During this time, our hearts beat faster, our breathing speeds up, and our bodies release adrenaline.

Our bodies act this way when we feel physically threatened AND when we feel emotionally threatened - like during a difficult conversation.

It makes sense, then, that when our bodies snap into fight or flight mode, we prepare to defend ourselves. This defense can take the form of a physical defense or an emotional one, but during both forms of defense, our ability to critically and intellectually listen to our opponent becomes compromised.

Think of it this way: during fight or flight, our bodies shift energy from cognitive tasks to protective ones. ***Thus, listening to someone else, empathizing with them, and having the ability to compromise with them is super hard during critical conversations because our bodies are working against us.***

HOW PARENTS SET THEMSELVES UP FOR CONVERSATION FAILURE

Critical Conversations tend to be spontaneous. Kids have great timing, right?

When you have time to have a nice long conversation with your child, they seem to not be in the talking mood. But when ARE they ready to open up and talk? That's right - when you're tired, stressed from work, in the middle of a household project, or any other inconvenient time.

Because critical conversations tend to happen during unplanned and inconvenient moments, we sometimes don't handle the conversations as well as could have if we were totally prepared for the topic beforehand.

We can't stop these unplanned conversations from happening, but we can develop a system to reacting to them in a way that provides the guidance that your child needs and builds a strong parent-child bond.

We create an Ineffective Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. Are you familiar with the principle of the self-fulfilling prophecy? It's the psychological principle that says we tend to either directly or indirectly make a situation happen *simply by believing that it can happen*.

For example, if a parent believes that their child is lazy and does not like to study, this belief about their child will then CAUSE their child to shy away from studying.

This is done directly when the parent doesn't promote a consistent after school study routine because they believe that it's too much trouble and a waste of time.

HOW PARENTS SET THEMSELVES UP FOR CONVERSATION FAILURE

The parent indirectly makes this belief come true by transferring this belief to their child. Kids tend to believe the descriptions they hear about themselves - especially descriptions they hear from their parents. As such, kids will often conform to the negative beliefs that their parents have about them.

How does this relate to difficult conversations with our teens? We inadvertently create self-fulfilling prophecies during emotional conversations by letting our words, body language, and/or our attitudes express our beliefs about our child.

As we've previously discussed, there are some really good reasons why we don't react in the best way during difficult conversations, and we can say things, act without thinking, and/or have an attitude that doesn't help guide our child or build a good relationship with them when this happens.

So, if there are so many reasons why difficult conversations with our teens can go wrong, what can we do?

Now that you know some of the "traps" that many well-meaning parents fall into when having difficult conversations with their teens, it's time to transition to learning the techniques that do work.

THE TECHNIQUES YOU NEED TO BE USING

As discussed above, you can't always control when difficult conversations happen with your teenager, but you can control how you react to them.

Having a plan in place is the first step to ensuring that difficult conversations with your teen changes from something that you dread to times that are meaningful to both you and your teen.

In order to make this change happen, you need to make the four commitments described below.

Commit to having difficult conversations with your child. Remember above when we discussed the three options for reacting to a difficult conversation? One typical reaction that many of us choose is to avoid having the conversation altogether.

Going forward, you have to resolve having these conversations with your teen. It might be tempting to avoid the conversation or to give in to what your child wants in order to end the conversation, but this won't get you what you want.

When you see that a difficult conversation is about to happen, take a deep breath and remember why this is important: you want to be the guiding force for your child and you want to create a positive and warm bond with your child.

Commit to moving out of fight or flight. So we discussed above how our biology can trick us into being poor listeners and even worse thinkers.

Now that you have resolved not to run from the conversation, the next step is to identify how your body acts to fight or flight and then resolve to actively take steps to return to your normal functioning.

THE TECHNIQUES YOU NEED TO BE USING

During difficult conversations, take notice of your body: do you start to breath rapidly? Does your heart beat out of your chest? Do you ball up your hands or tense up?

Once you identify how your body reacts to fight or flight, take steps to calm down in the moment. Take long, slow breaths. Remind yourself that your child is not the enemy. If you are worrying about the work you should be doing, or the dinner you should be cooking, or you have a disagreement with your co-worker on your brain, try to push these thoughts out of your mind right now and focus on your child.

Tell yourself that this moment will not last forever, and that YOU can positively influence your child once you are out of fight or flight mode.

Commit to ending negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Get honest with yourself and think introspectively about any judgements you have about your child or yourself.

This step is all about committing to believing in your child and yourself. Your child might have behaved a certain way in the past, but it doesn't have to define them.

The same can be said for you, too. Perhaps in the past you behaved in a way that you are not proud of. You CAN change. Believe that you can and this self-fulfilling prophecy will come true.

Commit to ending negative self-fulfilling prophecies - and begin using positive ones.

The self-fulfilling prophecy principle has been proven over and over again to work, so you might as well use it to your advantage!

THE TECHNIQUES YOU NEED TO BE USING

Take the following steps to create positive self-fulfilling prophecies:

- What are some of your knee-jerk judgements you've made about your child or family in the past (i.e. your child is lazy, your family doesn't care, etc.)?
- After identifying your usual judgements, now identify what the OPPOSITE judgement would be (i.e. judging a child to be lazy would turn into believing that the child has potential if she just puts forth enough effort).
- Once you've created positive self-fulfilling prophecies, begin to behave in a way that communicates this prophecy to your child or family both verbally and nonverbally.

That's it. That's all it takes to make this psychological principle work in your favor. It may feel strange at first - but don't give up on it! I'll bet that you'll see progress in a very short period of time.

Commit to using your new communication plan - no matter what! The biggest factor in making your new communication plan a success is to use it consistently.

New systems always take awhile to feel comfortable and successful. Don't give up if:

- You accidentally revert back to the way you used to communicate - learn from your mistakes instead of giving up on your new plan
- It feels "weird" using the new plan - it will feel more comfortable soon
- Your child or family thinks you seem "fake" - your willingness to consistently make an effort to improve the communication between you will eventually change their minds
- It seems like it's taking a long time to work - success doesn't happen overnight, and better communication with your teen is worth putting in the effort on this.

CONCLUSION

As Modern Parents, we all want a close and loving relationship with our teenagers. Many parents and teens over a long period of time have slipped into an ineffective communication pattern that slowly tore apart what once was a good parent-child relationship.

By using scientific studies to our advantage, we now know specific strategies that help to strengthen the parent-child bond through effective communication.

We can't avoid having difficult conversation with our teenagers, but we can resolve to have these conversations with the dual goals of providing the guidance that our child needs AND to build a solid parent-child bond.

CONTACT



Hi there!

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I help parents raise classically great kids in a Modern World by providing science-based solutions to many common challenges.

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