

## ***Confronting Your Teen's Mistakes***

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*"The difference between the exact right words and the almost right words is like the difference between lightning bugs and lightning bolts."* — Mark Twain

Avoiding toxic words and wrong motivations helps maintain a solid relationship while effectively confronting your teen's mistakes.

I haven't met a teen yet who doesn't want to know they will continue to be loved when they've made mistakes. Loving someone seems easy when everything is going well. It's a quite different matter when your teen breaks your rules, and their life spins out of control. In those times, the best way to demonstrate your continual love for them is to take care in the way you confront their misbehavior, avoiding toxic words and wrong motivations.

The first step is to let your teen know why you are confronting their misbehavior. It is that you love them and want to help them avoid bigger problems later in life. Demonstrate your respect for them by your demeanor, assuring them that you will move toward them in times of difficulty and struggle, not away from them. Tell them that you can't possibly love them any more than you do, and you'll never love them any less, not even when they are at their worst.

Be mindful that your teen knows what they have done, and it's already uncomfortable for them without adding verbal or emotional fireworks. Focus on fixing the behavior, not the person. Remember, behaviors can be changed, but people rarely do.

Keep the word "you" to a minimum when talking to your teen, other than when praising them or saying positive things about their character. For instance, instead of "You broke curfew," say, "Curfew was broken." It seems like a little thing, but as soon as you use the word "you," the teen feels as though they are being attacked personally.

Also avoid using definitive words like "never," and "always," in such discussions. Statements like "You never listen to me," or, "You always come home late," attack their character, not the behavior. The more you attack their character, the more likely they'll feel the need to defend themselves and their actions in return. They may even begin identifying with the behavior and work hard to live up to it, thinking "I'm just the black sheep of the family." So make it clear that they have it within them to do better; that they are a better person than their behavior is demonstrating.

Getting what you want from a discussion with your teen has nothing to do with how right you are and how wrong they are. It has everything to do with your motivation and approach. Ask yourself, "Will my approach move this discussion to a positive resolution, or away from it?" "Could my words increase our mutual respect for one another, or decrease it?" And finally, "Will my words encourage my teen to improve, or encourage them to just hide their behavior from me in the future?"

So, be sure to also check your attitude and hurt feelings at the door before approaching your teen about an issue that needs to be addressed. Focus on what you are trying to accomplish, not on how you feel about the situation. Inappropriate motivations can all too easily sneak into your conversation, which will interfere with bringing about positive results.

Here are inappropriate motivations to be avoided:

- To unload your frustration. Don't dump on your teen, they'll resent it. They probably already have enough frustrations of their own.
- To prove yourself right and your teen wrong. It is not a matter of who is right and who is wrong, it is a matter of dealing with the matter at hand, and solving the problem.
- To crush them into submission. This is an ungodly response to a poor choice, and sets a terrible example. It usually doesn't work for the long-term, and will give your teen the desire to take revenge; another inappropriate response. Never threaten or demean a teenager into changing their behavior. They might appear to make the change when they are around you, but behind your back they'll do the opposite.
- To change them into something or someone else. Teens don't change based on what their parents tell them. They change when they want to and in response to the

consequences or pain they experience from making a bad decision. And most kids are already uncomfortable in their own skin, so telling them that they need to change to be accepted by you only makes them more confused and uncomfortable.

- To threaten them. Anything more than stating that a consequence will be applied should they step over the line is just bullying them. Empty threats are even worse. Your teen will come to know you don't really mean what you say when you don't enforce threatened consequences.

Now, here are appropriate motivations and goals to focus on as you have that talk:

- To be clear and concise, and make sure your teen understands your concern for them.
- To better understand your teen, or communicate you'd like to better understand them.
- To give them rest from a wearying situation — yes, their transgressions can be emotionally burdensome.
- To more clearly communicate your household beliefs, rules, and consequences.
- To solve the problem at hand and prevent it from happening again.

You'll notice that I positioned "To solve the problem" last on that list, not first. That's because you'll never get to really solving the problem unless you first work on the relationship. Problem-solving demands a good relationship and trust by your teen that you have their best interests at heart.

Please don't hear me say that a parent should act subservient or apologetic to a teen when they are confronting inappropriate behavior. Say what you mean when you speak, and mean what you say, but choose words that won't cause your teen to have to defend who they are as a person, and make sure your motivations are right.

I also recommend adding some levity to the discussion. It reduces the tension and allows you to focus on the issue without sounding angry or upset. And sometimes it doesn't need to be a long drawn-out discussion. For instance, when I confront kids I usually do so with a big smile, saying something like, "Wow! You really blew it! What happened?" Approaching it this way tends to make the teen respond, "Yeah, I guess I did." Getting them to agree and take ownership for their mistake is a healthy first step. And asking them "what happened?" gives them an opportunity to respond and explain themselves without inferring that it was all their fault.

Did you see from this example that I didn't attack their character nor them personally for making a mistake? In fact, if anything, I told them that they did a really good job of messing up! Moreover, I set them on a path to do a really good job of not messing up again in the future, because I then applied consequences, saying, "Well, I guess you already know that means you'll be raking a lot of pine needles this week?" (one of the traditional consequence for kids in our residential program who step over the line). "Yeah, I guess so," they'll respond. Then, I let the consequences do the teaching. As they rake pine needles (without being entertained by their iPod, by the way) it gives them ample time to think about their behavior and ample reason not to repeat it.

After they complete the assigned consequence, we again have a chat. That's when I reassure them that the error is now forgotten and that it is water under the bridge; thereby restoring open communications. And I again express confidence in them that they have it within them to avoid making that mistake again. I might even offer some advice from my own mistakes in life to help them from making the same mistake again.

The way that you manage confrontation is more important than you may think. How you relate to and interact with your children at such pivotal times will determine the quality of your relationship with them in the future. How you stand with them even in their times of misbehavior will determine if your children will mature into caring, loving and responsible adults.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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