



ERIK'S CAUSE

*Kids like Erik are dying every week –
YOU CAN HELP!
“Help Stop the Choking Game”*

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HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR TEENAGER

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Almost everyone of us has a teen we care about. We can and should save their lives. It takes caring, love and support, and not being afraid of discussing challenging subjects with them. We don't necessarily have to have all the answers at our fingertips but we need to be honest and keep the lines of communication open with them.

Teenagers say that parents are *the most important influence*. That's why it's important to talk — and listen — to your teen. A lot. Take a walk or go for a drive with him. When there's not much eye contact, he won't feel like he's under a microscope. Here's a look at how brain development can affect teen communication, plus advice on how to talk with your teenager:

Your teen could be lacking communication skills – It's a Brain Thing:

- Because his Prefrontal Cortex isn't mature, he has a terrible time with facial expressions. (You may feel surprised, but he thinks you're angry.)¹
- Add that to his tendency to act on impulse (over-reactive Amygdala) and his limited emotional control (Prefrontal Cortex again), and you've got a recipe for major communication problems.
- Here's another thing: Your teen may act up around you because there's hardly any risk in it. No matter how horrible he is, he knows you won't ditch him (though his friends probably would). He's testing his limits with you because he feels safe. Think of it as a compliment.

Active listening can clue you in to what's really bugging him:

- The next time your teen flies off the handle, try using "active listening" to get past the emotions and move on to what's really bugging him.
- It works like this: You listen without interrupting (no matter what), and then sum up what you heard for him to confirm. In the end, you get clear on his problem and he feels understood.²

Once he's had his say, you might start with:

- It seems like you're feeling...
- I hear you say you're feeling...
- I wonder if you're feeling...
- Am I right that you're feeling...

Then describe the emotions you saw:

- It sounds to me like you're feeling hurt and angry. Is that true?
- I hear you saying that you're overwhelmed. Am I right?

Or, use a figure of speech if that works better:

- It seems like you're at your wit's end. Is that right?
- Are you feeling like that situation is out of control?
- Don't worry about whether you're right or wrong his response will guide you. That's how the connection begins.

"I" statements keep the flow going:

Having your say can be tricky. If he feels like he's being judged or blamed, the connection ends. (He can't hear you because he's busy thinking up his defense.) "I" statements let you express yourself without attacking your teenager. You describe his behavior, how you feel about it, and how it affects you.³ Then you spell out what you need. Like this:

- "When you don't come home on time, I worry that something terrible has happened. What I need is for you to call me as soon as you know you're going to be late so that I know you're okay."
- "I feel like you can't hear what I have to say when you're so mad. Then I get frustrated. I need to talk about this later when we're both able to listen."
- "Because I love you and I want to keep you safe, I worry about you going to the concert. I need to know that you will obey our rules."

With "I" statements, you use persuasion (not control or blame) to cause a change in his behavior. You also allow him to help decide what happens next — another key to bonding.

Remember –

- Talk with every teen you know and always tell them you care and you will listen when they want to talk.
- Seek to understand what is being said
- Pay attention to inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal messages
- Listen for understanding rather than “truth”
- Respond to “Emotions”:
 - Reflect his/her emotions by expressing concern about observed reactions
 - Legitimize feelings the s/he shares
 - Express support for the teen
- Demonstrate Respect:
 - Acknowledge potential issues relating to the his/her:
 - Developmental stage
 - Cultural and/or religious beliefs, practices and gender
 - Sexual preferences
 - Rights

Sources:

1. Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training*, page 129
2. David Walsh, *Why Do They Act That Way?* pages 77-79
3. Sandra Boston de Silvia, *Aiming Your Mind: Strategies and Skills for Conscious Communication*, page 47