

Principles of Parenting

Communicating With Your Teen: Negotiation

► Using six key steps can help you and your teen find solutions when you strongly disagree.

"I'm the parent!" "Because I said so." "When did I lose control over my child?" Do you find yourself thinking or saying these things after experiencing disagreements with your teen?

It's hard sometimes for a parent to accept that a child is challenging rules and family decisions. Teens do this because they are now old enough to begin questioning their own and others' beliefs and actions. This is good, though, because when teens become adults they will have to make important decisions about how to live their lives and guide the lives of others that they care about.

Parents of teens have the challenge of setting limits on behaviors to ensure their teens' safety. At the same time, they have the challenge of permitting their teens freedom to explore their own ideas and experiences. Sometimes it is hard for parents to know how much to hold onto and how much to let go of when it comes to their teens.

Whatever the situation, make this message clear to your teens: *With freedom comes responsibility*. As your teens and you negotiate new privileges, you also need to negotiate new responsibilities.

Teens still need your help in learning how to determine which rules and decisions are the best ones for them and for others. For instance, there is more than one way to cook a meal, clean a room, or organize one's day. Parents and teens may not see eye to eye on how these and other day-to-day activities should be done, and disagreements result.

As bad as it can feel, some disagreement between a parent and child is good. Working out disagreements provides valuable learning opportunities for teens and can actually strengthen parent-teen relationships. One way for parents and teens to work out their differences is through collaborative problem solving.



Collaborative Problem Solving

Collaborative problem solving means that you and your teens are working together to negotiate a solution that you both think is fair. It involves six important steps, which are described here through the example of Tonya and her son Jefferson as they work out a problem.

Tonya decides to use collaborative problem solving with her 14-year-old son Jefferson when it seems that they are constantly arguing over his recent choice of friends. Jefferson likes Kevin and Jack because they are the two toughest guys at school. Tonya is concerned about the influence of these two tough guys on her son.

Jefferson has been arguing more with Tonya lately. He has turned down invitations to play ball from his long-time friend George, and he also was involved in a fight. Tonya worries that Jefferson might see fighting as a way to impress his new buddies.

Tonya mentions her concerns to Jefferson. He just laughs and tells her that she is worrying for nothing and had better not tell him who he can hang with.

Tonya decides to try a different approach to his friend choices. She decides to negotiate with Jefferson using the following six steps.

Step 1. Establish Ground Rules

These are the rules that will help you and your teens work fairly through the problem that you are negotiating. Good ground rules include the following:

- Treat each other with respect.
- Avoid name-calling, sarcasm, or put-downs.
- Listen to each other's point of view.

You can help your teens agree to the ground rules by stating up front that you want to be fair. They also may have some ground rules to add to the list.

Tonya: I know that we have different views about who you should have as your friends. I want to have a discussion with you so that we can each share how we feel about this. I want you to understand how I feel, and I want to understand how you feel. Let's solve this together so that we both think the answer we come up with is fair. Let's agree to listen to each other's point of view and talk calmly and respectfully to each other.

Jefferson: Okay, as long as we both get to decide.

Step 2: Reach a Mutual Understanding

The next step is to take turns being understood. Each of you has the opportunity to say what you think the real problem is and how you feel about it. You also take turns rephrasing what you heard the other one say. Rephrasing helps in three important ways: (1) it allows you to check to see if you understood each other correctly; (2) it lets you know that the other person is paying attention and trying to understand your point of view; and (3) it allows you to rehear what you have communicated.

Tonya: The way you act when you hang around Kevin and Jack really bothers me. You recently got into a fight, you have stopped hanging out with your old friends, you seem to be angry a lot, and you've been coming home late after school.

Jefferson: I have the right to pick my own friends. That one fight didn't have anything to do with Kevin and Jack. If I don't want to hang out with people like George, that's up to me.

Tonya: So let me make sure I understand how you see things. You feel it is important that you be able to pick the friends you spend time with. You also are saying that the fight you had did not have anything to do with your new friends.

Jefferson nods his head.

Tonya: How do you think I feel about it?

Jefferson: You think I'm getting into trouble and looking angry now that I'm hanging out with Kevin and Jack. You would rather I didn't hang out with them, but you do want me to hang out with George.

Tonya: You are right that I am bothered by your fighting and being angry a lot and that I think it might be because of your new friends. But I do not want to pick your friends for you or to make you hang out with people that you don't want to be with.

Step 3. Brainstorm

During this step, both of you think of as many solutions as possible. Do not worry yet about judging how good the solutions are. Just try to list as many as possible. Set a time limit of about 5 minutes to brainstorm solutions.

The following are possible solutions:

- Tonya trusts Jefferson to pick his own friends and stops nagging him.
- Jefferson agrees to stop hanging out with Jack and Kevin.
- Tonya gets to meet Jack and Kevin.
- Jefferson agrees to hang out with Jack and Kevin in places where he is less likely to get into fights.
- Tonya and Jefferson decide together which people Jefferson can be friends with.
- Jefferson agrees to introduce his old friends to his new friends.
- Tonya has Jefferson switched to a different school.



Step 4. Agree to One or More Solutions

During this stage, you and your teens select the options you like best (do not try to discuss every option). Once the favorite options are selected, see if you have selected any of the same options. See if options that you like best can be changed a little so that both of you find them acceptable. It is during this stage that negotiation “give and take” will be necessary. The solution you agree to should be one that both of you find acceptable.

After some discussion, Tonya agrees to stop bugging Jefferson about Kevin and Jack if she can meet and get to know them. Jefferson agrees that he won’t get into anymore fights.

Step 5. Write Down Your Agreement

Sometimes our memories aren’t completely reliable and we forget what we agreed to do. Writing down solutions can help us remember. Make sure you write down what your teens are expected to do and what you are expected to do.

Jefferson agrees to bring Kevin and Jack to his house for dinner so that they can meet his mother. Jefferson will not get into anymore fights and will come home in time for dinner.

Tonya agrees to permit Jefferson to choose his own friends as long as he keeps his promise to stay free of fights, to be home in time for dinner, and to let Tonya have the chance to meet his new friends.

Step 6. Set a Time for Follow-up Discussion to Evaluate Your Progress

This final step is very important. The solution you agreed to might not work as well as you thought it would. By taking the time to discuss your progress you can decide if the solution needs to be changed.

Jefferson might have a bigger problem with fighting than Tonya originally thought. Tonya might find it too difficult to permit Jefferson to hang out with Jack and Kevin if she continues to believe they are a bad influence on her son.

Using these six steps can help you and your teens negotiate and find solutions when you strongly disagree.

You also can practice your negotiation skills at times when you are not facing a serious issue, such as when you are playing games or doing activities you both enjoy. Here are some suggestions:

- Plan and make a meal together, making sure you have equal input about the dishes being made.
- Take a small amount of money each month (\$10 to \$20) and decide together how that money can be spent to buy one thing that both of you really want.
- Plan a day trip to a nearby area and work out a schedule of what you will do together that suits both of your interests.

Additional Resources

“Principles of Parenting: Building Family Strengths,” Extension publication HE-0608, www.aces.edu.

“Principles of Parenting: Communicating With Your Teen,” Extension publication HE-0780, www.aces.edu.

You and Your Adolescent: A Parent’s Guide for Ages 10–20, L. Steinberg and A. Levine, 1997.



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