

The parent-teen relationship: Conflict resolution

Resolving an argument with a friend, spouse or coworker is hard enough. But how about when it's with your own teenager?

The idea doesn't have to be daunting, says Sara Bennett, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare. In fact, good conflict resolution skills are critical to being a good parent.

Common problems

Disagreements among parents and teens usually happen around rules, boundaries and expectations, Bennett says. After all, the teen years are a time when the child is becoming more independent. Conflicts can arise about poor grades, time spent playing video games instead of chores or even disagreements about when to go to bed. With older kids, parents might have concerns about friends being bad influences or how the child's significant other is treating them.

"Sometimes we think we have it figured out, but the conflict gets bigger," Bennett says, commenting on how these conflicts lead to everyday aches and pains. "Kids can isolate themselves. Parents can even isolate themselves. We feel big emotions about what the kid is doing or not doing. Sometimes it can feel like direct disrespect. We start focusing on the child's character. We forget sometimes that they're just kids."

It's not unheard of for kids to turn to risky behaviors (like alcohol or drugs) or even run away from home if their home life is not good, Bennett adds.

Repairing the rift

Above all else, Bennett says parents should approach conflict resolution as relationship building, not being a power figure who's determined to be right.

"Kids really want to be heard. They really like consistency," Bennett says.

"The next thing you really want to do is hear what they have to say. Understand where they're coming from. Put yourself in their shoes even if we know it's a dumb idea or moot point. Validate their emotions," she adds. "Words like, 'I understand. That would be very challenging. What was going through your mind when that was happening to you? How did you work through this problem?'"

Then, Bennett says, the parent could share their perspective and try to reach a solution that has something for both sides. For example: mom and dad think their teen should be able to maintain B grades. What's the child's take? What would happen if their grades slipped below a B average? What's a good compromise?

Bennett also stresses that parents should take accountability for their mistakes.

"Kids are going to learn just as much when you step back," Bennett says. "Words like: 'I came to you out of frustration. It probably seemed angry. I didn't mean for it to sound like that. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. It was out of fear. I'm going to do better to manage my own stuff so I can really respect where you're coming from.'"

Seeing a professional

If conflicts with your teen at home are making daily life difficult, you should consider seeing a mental health professional – either separately or together with your child. Bennett says when a child hears an outside perspective, they might have an a-ha moment. "Oh, I do get where mom and dad are coming from," Bennett says, putting herself in a young person's shoes.

Adults can also gain parenting strategies through therapy, especially if their child is engaging in risky behaviors or threatening self-harm. Bennett says the child could need to be seen in the emergency department. A therapist can provide parents with ways to cross that difficult bridge.

If the child and parent see a therapist together: "The therapist could act as a mediator and, actively within the situation, model those repairs and resolutions," Bennett says. "Then the parents and teens can do it more effectively [at home]."

Learn more

Read more about [mental health resources](#) available at OSF that can help build good family dynamics. Some resources, like [behavioral health navigators](#) and [support groups](#) at hospitals like the one Bennett works at, are available even if you are not an OSF patient.