

Connecting with your Teen

What to do when you butt heads with your strong-willed teen

Does your teen like to challenge rules?

Maybe you feel like you are continually in a battle of wills (a bit like being part of the Game of Thrones series).

Perhaps your teen, who not so long ago was willing to conform, suddenly starts asserting themselves - and their opinions – very strongly.

Or they don't want to be around you the way they used to. Feels like a knife to the heart kind of rejection, right?

Sometimes teens are labelled rebellious. While rebellion is a common stereotype, the primary goal through teenage years is to achieve independence and to do this, teens need to start pulling away from their parents.

According to Joseph Allen, University of Virginia, in a study published in the Journal of Child Development, teens who talk back to their parents are less likely to give into peer pressure than teens who go with the flow.

OK, so that's pretty comforting to know. Still doesn't mean it feels great for you, the parent.

If you're constantly butting heads with your teen, I'd say there's a pretty good chance that both of you are strong willed, and strong-willed people generally want to have a sense of control over their life.

So how do you give your teen an appropriate level of autonomy without feeling like you, the parent, has relinquished complete control?

When you start, you'll likely feel stretched and challenged.

So, next time there's a clash of wills, check in with yourself about:

- How much you allow them to be an individual (for example, allowing their opinions and tastes to differ from yours)
- Whether you're quick to judge or overreact
- Whether you allow them to speak and you really, truly listen to them (this means looking at them and acknowledging them as they speak, and no interrupting)
- The types of boundaries that are meaningful to you and your teen

When it feels like they are over-asserting themselves:

- Allow them to talk (again, no interrupting) then calmly repeat it back to them so they know you heard them.
- Be mindful of not exaggerating or overstating their thoughts or opinions.
- Ask them if you've misinterpreted something and, if you have, give them an opportunity to clarify.
- Describe what you want or how you see things – have a discussion with the aim of getting a win/win outcome.

A couple of other helpful points:

- Don't get stuck on small details – think about the big picture here.
- If you lower your personal barriers, over time they will feel safer and may lower theirs too.
- Be the parent you needed when you were a teen.

You may not see instant results but over time you should see an improvement in the way you and your teen interact with each other.

Don't fear getting it wrong and don't be too proud to apologise if you didn't quite get it right. Trying something different can feel clunky at first and besides it's good for teens to know it's OK to get things wrong and learn from mistakes.

At the end of the day, parents and teens both want to have a good relationship, to feel loved, and be happy at home.

One last tip. If you try to implement too many things at once, your teen could likely think you're weird or something. Make a commitment to change just one thing today then add on more as you go.

Show the world who you really are.

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