

**Communicating With Your Teen**  
**Using 20-20 Hindsight -- In Advance!**  
Steven Pechter Freemire, MFT and Mary Schrey, MFT

**20 Tips for Using 20-20 Hindsight -- in Advance!**

**1. Count to 10 before speaking.** The old adage is true. You're less likely to regret what you say next. Restraint is actually a strength!

All feelings are acceptable, but making decisions based on feelings is often unwise. Modeling restraint will help your teen to learn to act less impulsively.

**2. If you think it's a bad time to have this discussion, it is. Be ready to HALT\* because one of you is too Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.**

We knew to heed these factors when they were toddlers; it's really no different even though they are teens. "Let's eat and talk later."

**3. Be specific not global about the problem and ask for what you want.**

"I'm upset you are acting out your anger by screaming. I understand you are angry but I need you to express it differently." Don't vocalize your catastrophic fears about the future ("I can't ever trust you getting behind the wheel of the car until you show me you can control your anger.")

**4. Say "No" with sympathetic firmness.** (Not "scolding while saying no" or "complaining while saying yes")

It's reasonable to set limits that your teen isn't happy with. Just don't expect they'll understand and appreciate why you are doing this. Instead, be apologetic ("I'm sorry I'm stricter than other parents.") Then calmly stand by your decision.

**5. "I'm not comfortable" is a valid reason for saying NO.**

You have to live with the decisions you make as a parent. It's fine to let that inform your choices. "I'm sorry, I'm just not comfortable letting you do that sleepover unless a parent is home." Or, if you are willing to consider it, "Tell me what actions you will take so I can feel comfortable about your safety (i.e. call you at a pre-determined time to check in)

\*HALT From Michael Riera, *Staying Connected to Your Teenager*

**6. Complain all you want - even shout out your exasperation, despair, frustration and anger -- to someone who will understand: your spouse, friend or therapist - not your kid. Then go back to tips #3 and #4.**

**7. It's OK to say you're angry and let your teen see how you feel - so long as you express the feeling rather than "acting it out."** "I'm really angry with you right now for breaking our agreement." Express the feeling directly. Don't bang on the table, use swear words or storm out of the room to make your point. It can feel gratifying to lose control in the heat of the moment so it is hard work to keep our tempers in check. If you don't, you are usually left with poor modeling, possible escalation and parent guilt.

**8. Be fair and flexible in how you enforce rules and consequences. This will keep the door open for connection and mutual respect.**

If your teen knows the punishment doesn't fit the crime ("You're grounded for the next six months!"), they'll dig their heels in. If she explains that she stayed out past curfew because her friend got sick and she didn't want to leave her, you can be sympathetic and say "I see you were being a good friend, but I am going to ground you for next Saturday because you didn't call and I had to stay up another hour waiting and worrying."

**9. Be concrete about the behaviors you expect or they promise.**

Getting a general agreement that your teen won't drink at the party isn't sufficient. Ask him or her "Can you tell me 5 ways you'll say 'no' when Sheila says, "Oh, come on, have a beer -- it'll loosen you up and we'll have more fun"?

**10. Be playful and creative in your attempts to get them to talk.**

Instead of "How was school?" "Fine." Try asking, "That history test you were studying so hard for last night - was it a good one? What was easiest? Hardest? Or, try making it a game - For example, "Tell me 2 truths and a lie about your day today and I'll guess which one is the lie."

**11. When they do start talking, your job is to listen.**

When they start telling you how they were bullied or hurt, and you find your protective blood boiling, go back to #1 and count to 10. Then keep listening... listen some more .... Sympathize ... and listen some more. Praise them for their sharing.

**12. "One mistake parents make is when they take too personally some of their teenager's pushing away behaviors and not personally enough their indirect requests for reconnecting." Michael Riera**

They aren't really pushing you away; they are pushing away the problem they have a hard time talking about. They may be embarrassed; they may worry you'll be disappointed in them, or that you'll freak out. Conversely, it may be hard for them to ask for help so they'll drop hints. Watch for the clues.

**13. When they ask for help, don't try to solve it for them, but don't leave them on their own either. Support them to find a solution.**

Brainstorm ways they can raise \$500 for that iPhone rather than telling them how outrageously expensive it is. Invite their ideas on resolving a conflict with a friend. Ask before offering suggestions and be careful not to jump in out of your anxiety or desire to help. A light touch can go a long way.

**14. Be open to the unexpected moments.**

Important talks may not happen when you decide to have them, but when your child provides the opening - late at night, in the car, etc. As one teen said, "It's so patronizing when my parents sit me down and lecture me."

**15. Take care of your issues: self-care and self-management are key.**

It's like putting the oxygen mask on yourself first in the airport cabin - you've got to take care of your "stuff" before you can expect to stay calm in the face of theirs.

- Where are you irritable, unhappy, and uncertain in your life?
- How are your needs not being met? How are you managing your stress?
- What interests do you have besides parenting your teen?

**16. Adolescence is a time of amazing growth, which can cause tremendous disequilibrium (no wonder it's called "growing pains.")**

Under that façade of certainty is confusion. That's normal, even inevitable. Teens may go toward either fight or flight to escape confusion. Try to stay calm with your uncertainty about what to do and how it will all shake out.

**17. When they do make mistakes, don't make yourself the enemy by jumping all over them or guilt-tripping them.**

Instead, help them notice the struggle within themselves rather than making it a huge struggle between you.

**Riera's formula for discipline: Focus on integrity not obedience**

1. Suggest or solicit a consequence
2. Move past consequences into being curious about his choice: "Was some part of you uncomfortable cutting class with the other guys?"
3. Wait. When he acknowledges internal conflict, ask what got in the way of listening to that voice and acting on it.
4. Sit back and stay patient. Let him wrestle with how he gave his integrity away.

**18. As your child's brain develops and increasingly gains the capacity for making better choices, you need to serve as their pre-frontal cortex.** Sometimes they'll need you to contain them and say "no" to taking risks; on the other hand, sometimes, they'll need you to encourage them to stretch and go outside their comfort zones in order to help them grow.

**19. You be the one to make the "repair." Help them re-engage.**

When you both feel wronged, someone has to swallow his or her pride and extend the olive branch. They need you, the adult, to have the strength to do that. How? Perhaps saying you're sorry. Or asking "Would you like a hug? A cup of hot chocolate?" Reaching out helps you reconnect and also models to them how to repair relationships in the future with friends and spouses.

**20. Find ways to have fun, relaxed time together. Create small rituals of connection. Outings to Starbucks or Jamba Juice; a shoulder massage at night; weekly emails saying what you appreciate about them.** As they get older, the rituals may change but are no less important to sustain warm times together and a sense of predictable, positive connection.

Several tips are adapted from *Staying Connected to your Teenager* by Michael Riera. Also, thanks to Catherine Freemire, LCSW, for her contributions to these tips based on many years as a parent and Parent Coach.

---

Steven Pechter Freemire, MFT  
Offices in Walnut Creek, Berkeley  
510-869-2505  
[Freemire@jps.net](mailto:Freemire@jps.net)  
[www.contracostamenscenter.org](http://www.contracostamenscenter.org)

Mary Schrey, MFT  
Offices in Lafayette, Castro Valley  
925-299-1128, 510-538-4844  
[mschrey@astound.net](mailto:mschrey@astound.net)