

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My teenage daughter and I get into the worst arguments I have ever experienced. Almost anything will set one of us off. What begins as a small conflict quickly escalates into a screaming match; with her threatening to leave (she is almost 18). Do you have any advice as to how we can handle our conflicts with less yelling?

-- Frustrated Mother

Dear Frustrated,

Unless you live with your own clone who agrees with you on everything, conflicts are inevitable. Screaming, however, is optional. Disagreements are to be expected, and especially with a teenager who may be pushing the limits as she struggles for an independent sense of self.

Accept that there will be areas of dispute and work toward learning to “fight fair.” Here are a dozen rules for doing just that:

1. Timing is everything. Don't let things fester inside so that, when a small thing upsets you, you blow like a volcano. On the other hand, have patience to find the right time. Don't correct your teenager or otherwise engage her in a conflict in front of her friends. Choose a time when you will not be distracted by other family members, phones ringing, or other interruptions. Sit face to face, keeping eye contact, and quietly tell her why you are angry. In all circumstances, remain calm.
2. Stick to the immediate subject. Avoid bringing up past history because it cannot be changed. Be specific, and don't throw in the kitchen sink of complaints.
3. Don't project. Don't allow stress in other parts of your life or anger that really belongs to someone else to fuel a particular conflict with your daughter. Render unto Caesar.
4. Avoid statements that cut to a person's character. Instead, stick to the issue at hand. For example, “It made me angry when you came in after your curfew last night,” is much less incendiary than, “You are such a selfish brat. You never do what you say you will.” Those are fighting words, and they will ensure a (probably loud) and defensive response.
5. To the best of your ability, talk about *your* feelings: “I felt hurt when you yelled at me this morning.” Be honest about these. Think about this sentence structure: When you____, I feel _____. This allows you to take responsibility for your own feelings without blaming anyone else.
6. Give your daughter a chance to talk and then listen attentively. The writer Fran Liebowitz once wrote that there is no such thing as listening. Instead, she says, there is “talking, and waiting to talk.” During an argument, most people are formulating their next statement while the other is talking.

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1

Listen. Indicate that you have heard your daughter by reflecting what she said. Say, "What I hear you saying is _____ and I what I feel about that is _____."

7. Take turns talking. . This is a subset of healthy, active listening. No monologues and no talking over the other. Also, avoid clamming up. This is a form of withdrawal that makes conflict resolution impossible.
8. Be aware of your body language. Communications experts suggest that about 95% of what we communicate is not conveyed in words. Instead, it is expressed by tone and volume of voice, body language, facial expression, and so forth. Fighting fair excludes screaming, yelling, and throwing things.
9. Avoid behaviors that turn up the heat, such as blaming, name calling, accusing, cursing, threatening, sarcasm, and, of course, any kind of physical intimidation.
10. Don't make empty threats that you will not, and should not, act on. For example, don't say, "Fine, you'll be 18 soon. Move out on your own. I don't want you here." Your daughter should also remember this fighting fair rule the next time she threatens to bolt when you are arguing.
11. Offer compromises and ideas for action to avoid this same quarrel in the future. It amazes me how often people will argue about the same thing and in the same way. Hello! This strategy didn't work last time, why should it work now?
12. Apologize when you've been in the wrong, and be gracious in accepting your daughter's apology when she's been at fault.

Show your daughter this column. Come to an agreement about common ground rules for any future conflicts. If you and your daughter follow even a few of these tips, you will see a dramatic reduction in unhealthy and unproductive arguments. Also, make sure that you program into your lives lots of opportunities for good times together. Those experiences create a relationship that is better able to tolerate and grow through conflict.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.