

AVOIDING CONFLICT:

The Use of “I” Statements in Parenting Adolescents

As teens move towards independence, they try to make decisions on their own. Sometimes, they make good decisions; other times, they make unhealthy or unwise decisions. This can make parents worried, frustrated, or angry and can also lead to conflict.



When parents react to a problem, they often accuse their teen of being irresponsible or blame him for creating the problem. When this happens, teens feel judged and become defensive. Often, teens who feel condemned move quickly from being defensive towards becoming offensive. A natural response to “You did WHAT??!” is “You never trust me! I did not do that. You are so unfair!”

This kind of communication leads to homes filled with tension and anger. Rarely does this type of conversation allow a child or parent to communicate effectively and solve the problem.

One Strategy to Avoid this Cycle is to Use “I” Statements:

- **REPLACE “YOU” STATEMENT WITH “I” STATEMENTS.** Many arguments begin when you tell your teen what he did wrong. These statements usually begin with “You” and your child’s natural response is defensiveness. Instead, try using an “I” statement. This will help your child better understand what you are feeling and what you are worried about.
 - > **Be specific about your child’s behavior(s) or situations he is in that concern you.**
 - > **Describe how you feel.**
 - **Don’t say,** “You didn’t call to tell me that you wouldn’t be home for dinner.” This type of comment may cause your teen to respond defensively, “It’s not my fault! You are the one who won’t buy me a cell phone!”
 - > **Instead say,** “I feel worried when you don’t call to tell me where you are. It makes me think that you could be in trouble or need help.”
 - > **These kinds of statements may encourage problem solving and open communication because it makes your teen think of the other person’s point of view.** Instead of a defensive, argumentative response your teen might say, “Sorry you were worried, Mom. I guess, next time I could ask to borrow someone’s phone to call and let you know I’ll be late.”
- **KEYS TO AVOIDING UNHEALTHY ARGUMENTS**
 - > **Give yourself a “Time-out”**
 - You will offer your best guidance and your most effective consequences when you are calm.
 - If you are angry, tell your teen you need time and space to sort out your feelings.
 - **Don’t say,** “I can’t believe you left the scene of an accident! That was such a bad judgment call! You could get into so much trouble. I can’t believe you!”
 - > **Instead say,** “I’m very upset that you left the scene of an accident you caused and tried to lie to us about it. I need some time to think about how I feel, and to calm down before we talk about consequences for you and next steps with our insurance company.”

- Write down the two or three things you want your teen to most understand using “I” statements.

> **Take time to calmly explain why something upsets you**

- Don’t blame or criticize.
- Be sure to make eye contact.
- **Don’t say**, “Don’t swear at me. You are so disrespectful!”
 - > **Instead say**, “I know you are a respectful person and I need you to speak respectfully. I feel disrespected when you use the “f” word in front of me.”

> **Allow your child to fully explain himself and don’t interrupt**

- Your teen will be less likely to react angrily or reject your views if he feels genuinely heard.
- Show him you are listening carefully by restating in your own words what he says.
- Focus on what he is sharing instead of thinking about how you are going to respond.

> **Don’t bring up things from the past, focus on the current issue**

- If you have other concerns from the past that you want to talk about with your teen, bring them up at a different time.

> **Never tell your child that any feeling is wrong**

- If you do, he’ll feel put down or dismissed and he will stop sharing his thoughts and feelings.
- Help your teen describe what he is feeling in his own words.
- **You might say**, “How did that make you feel?”
- Check in with your child to make sure you understand his emotions.
- **You might say**, “It sounds like you might have felt disappointed and misled when your coach told you he didn’t want you to start in the next game, especially since he kept telling you throughout pre-season how much you’ve improved. Am I on the right track about how you felt?”

Practicing “I statements” on paper first, will help you collect your thoughts and make using them in conversation easier. You might write down:

1. *I am frustrated that you took the car without permission.*
2. *I am disappointed that you left the scene of the accident without calling us or the police.*
3. *I am worried that you were not completely honest with us about what happened.*



> **Set appropriate limits**

- Make sure your child knows that rules are in place for his safety, not to “control” him and not to get involved in his personal business.*
- Remind your teen that you care about him and that you will be there for him no matter what.

> **Don’t be afraid to apologize**

- If you think you’ve made a mistake, apologies can go a long way toward reducing arguments.
- **You might say**, “I have to apologize. I automatically assumed that you were responsible for the scratch on our car door. I didn’t realize that Mom had given your sister permission to drive the car after you brought it back on Saturday night. I’m sorry. I was upset and should have waited until I was calm to speak to you about my concerns.”

> **Establish flexible rules based on responsibility**

- Make sure your teen understands that the key to getting privileges is to demonstrate responsibility.
- Make it clear that rules are flexible and will change, *if and when*, your teen can show that he is dependable and capable of handling more responsibility.
- Also make it clear that your teen will lose those privileges *if* he shows that he can't handle them.
- Remember to never give in or to change rules if safety is at stake.*

Do not assume that all disagreement is to be avoided. Some conflicts can be healthy because it shows that teens think it is worthwhile to keep talking. Encourage teens to voice their opinions and argue their points of view. Make sure you listen and respond fairly when they make a good point. That's what keeps adolescents telling us what is going on in their lives.

> **Evaluate your conversation and have follow-up discussions with your child, if needed**

- Ask yourself if you reminded your teen that you love him unconditionally.
- Identify what worked well and where you ran into obstacles or tough spots in the conversation.
- Give yourself credit for working on your listening and communication skills.
- If there are areas you need to work on, check in with your teen about them.
 - > **You might say**, *"I was thinking about what we talked about yesterday. I owe you an apology. Looking back, I don't think I did a good job listening to what you were saying. I'm afraid I interrupted you a lot and spent more time talking about what I thought you should do than helping you come up with your own solutions. I'm sorry about that. Would you agree?"*

Even the most loving families have arguments. There are effective strategies to prevent these arguments from becoming hostile. Telling your child how an issue affects you by using "I" statements can bring out the best in him and can strengthen your relationship.

SOURCES:

Dr. Kenneth Ginsburg with Martha Jablow (2011) *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, American Academy of Pediatrics (www.fosteringresilience.com)

American Academy of Pediatrics (2010) How to resolve conflicts with your teen (www.HealthyChildren.org)

This work was developed by The Craig-Dalsimer Division of Adolescent Medicine of The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, in collaboration with The Child, Adolescent, and Family Behavioral Health Office, U.S. Army Medical Command, and The Military Child Education Coalition®.

Thank YOU



A PUBLIC EDUCATION MOVEMENT
OF THE BOB WOODRUFF FOUNDATION

This publication has been made possible by a grant from the Bob Woodruff Foundation.



MILITARY CHILD EDUCATION COALITION

909 Mountain Lion Circle | Harker Heights, Texas 76548 | 254.953.1923

www.MilitaryChild.org

©2012 Military Child Education Coalition